Event Title: Resurrection Not Erasure: When Poets Talk Back to History
3:20pm - 4:35pm, Saturday, February 10, 2024
Room 2502A, Kansas City Convention Center, Level 2

Event Description: Poets whose work complicates or writes against dominant narratives will discuss how the persona poem challenges historical erasure and revises both the past and present. Panelists will discuss the ethical implications of the personal poem, their decisions to use persona in their work, and their underlying methodologies and research in voicing the past.

Event Category: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer and Moderator
Alyse Bensel: Alyse Bensel is the author of Rare Wondrous Things: A Poetic Biography of Maria Sibylla Merian and three poetry chapbooks. She is an assistant professor of English at Brevard College, where she directs the Looking Glass Rock Writers’ Conference.

Event Participants
Nicole Cooley: Nicole Cooley is the author of seven books of poems, including the forthcoming Mother Water Ash (Louisiana State University Press 2024), a novel and two chapbooks. She is the director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing and Literary Translation at Queens College-City University of New York.

Blas Falconer: Blas Falconer is the author of four poetry collections, including Forgive the Body This Failure (Four Way Books 2018) and Rara Avis (forthcoming Four Way Books 2024). Winner of an NEA fellowship and the Maureen Egen Writers Exchange, he teaches in the MFA program at San Diego State University.

Vandana Khanna: Vandana Khanna is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently, Burning Like Her Own Planet (Alice James Books 2023). Her previous collections have won the Crab Orchard Review First Book Prize, The Miller Williams Poetry Prize, and the Diode Editions Chapbook Competition. Her poems have appeared in The New Republic, Academy of American Poets’

Event Outline

I. Welcoming Remarks and Panel Overview

Good afternoon, and welcome to the final panel group of the conference. This is “Resurrection Not Erasure: When Poets Talk Back to History.” We’re glad that you chose ours to end your AWP this year. My name is Alyse Bensel, and I’ll be serving as the moderator for today’s panel.

This panel has been many years in the making, so we are sorry that two of our original panelists, Shane McCrae and Cherene Sherrard, are unable to join us in Kansas City this Saturday afternoon, when we are all inevitably tired but hopefully ending the conference with joyful hearts. However, we have the incredible Vandana Khanna joining us, and we could not be happier that she was able to join us this afternoon.

Before we officially delve in, I wanted to remind everyone that printed copies of the panel outline and our remarks are available and should be accessible on the AWP conference app. At any time during our discussion, you are welcome to write down a question to ask later, or, if you’d like to drop off a question for me to read, you can do so. I’ll also repeat questions when they are asked.

We’ll begin with brief overviews of our own work on persona in both small and large-scale projects that span time periods, locations, and shared and divergent histories. Most importantly, we’ll each focus on how our poetry defies or complicates conventional historical narratives, shedding light on “forgotten,” erased, or obscured history. I’ll introduce us as a whole. Then, after our talks, I’ll lead a discussion on our work collectively, with time for questions from the audience.

II. Panelist Remarks
**Alyse Bensel:** “The Making of Rare Wondrous Things”: In March 2008, I visited the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam. I couldn’t tell you much about what of Rembrandt’s work I saw, because a special traveling exhibit caught my attention: *Women of Art and Science: Maria Sibylla Merian and Daughters*. Little did I know that Sibylla Merian’s miniaturist expertise of flora and Lepidoptera on watercolor on vellum would become my obsession for the next decade. Yet as I attempted to research her life, and her work, I became increasingly frustrated by the ephemeral remnants of her voice. So I took what I had (her dozen remaining letters, scientific descriptions from folio plates) and began constructing a voice. It was more like channeling because, for me, the persona poem is both hard-won and intuitive. I had done the research, and I had invested the time (duration with the subject is invaluable, in whatever way one can do so). The poems that came from that embodied the spirit of Sibylla Merian: serious but teasing, practical and dreamy, the contradictions of her life I found so fascinating. I will take the next few minutes of my time to break down a few examples of this in detail.

**Nicole Cooley:** “Rethinking persona and voice in poems: from the Salem Witch Trials to the New York Department of Sanitation”

I have always been fascinated by what Frank Bidart calls “how to fasten to the page the voice” and for many years have been trying to think it through in terms of documentary poetics and historical research. My presentation today will track my exploration of the documentary, research and voice. My second book of poems was a deeply researched investigation of the Salem Witch Trials titled *The Afflicted Girls*. I was fortunate to have a creative artists fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society and to research and write there for four weeks. During that time, I was so immersed in the world of 1692 that I felt my self dissolving in long days of silent research and writing. In the project that followed, *Breach*, I wrote poems about Katrina’s devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast and my parents’ experience as they did not evacuate during the storm. This collection raised new questions about ethics and voice, such as: how could I speak for people in New Orleans where I grew up but no longer lived? Could I speak for my parents who were still alive and had their own stories to tell? What about the other citizens of New Orleans who experienced terrible losses? And finally the book I am working on now also addresses these questions and raises new ones. I am currently
researching and writing my new collection, Trash, in the archives of the New York Public Library and investigating the history of the Department of Sanitation in NYC. I will discuss the ethics of speaking for others and how to work with voice in this new collection in progress.

Blas Falconer:

“Persona and the Second-Generation: Giving Voice to an Imagined Motherland”

I’ve never not written about Puerto Rico, my mother’s homeland. I spent much of my childhood there, among family, but always on the edge of custom and language, familiar with but not part of. Now, going back each year, my adopted son expresses a similar sentiment. He has been embraced by a large and loving family—a grandmother, great aunts, uncles, cousins—but he senses an indescribable barrier, always parsing out meaning, translating not only language but the subtleties of a gesture or phrase. I’ve come to think that this distance can never be entirely crossed because we were never fully shaped by the nuances of the place’s history. However, poetry—and persona in particular—might get us closer. By taking on the voice of historical figures, such as legendary Diego Salcedo, and of objects, such as the treasures that first drew people to this place, as well as the voices of those around us now, we can better locate what we know intimately—the affection of a kiss, the rhythm of a language, scents in the air, the landscapes of the mountains and the sea—in a place with the history that shaped it.

Vandana Khanna:

I’ve been working almost exclusively in persona for the last six years, culminating in my latest collection, Burning Like Her Own Planet, a retelling of epic Hindu myths from the point of view of the often-silenced, often-overlooked goddesses. Told in a series of persona poems and dramatic monologues, the book reinvents these myths into essential stories of love, betrayal, and faith. They speak in the voices of girls, wives, and mothers, all trying to carve a space for themselves in a world ruled by jealous gods and capricious luck.
What first sparked my interest in persona and reimagining of myths came in the form of a children’s picture book. I had a young son at the time, and we would read versions of these Hindu epics, stories about gods and goddesses, with full glossy pictures next to them. I thought this was a good way to introduce him to Hindu mythology without complicated plots and hundreds of pages of text.

As I began to read more and more of these stories to him, what struck me the most was the huge absence or erasure in these myths. Mainly, where were the stories of the goddesses? In these books, women often became accessories to both the gods and the stories themselves—beautiful, loyal wives, daughters and mothers that had little or no agency. They were often “acted upon” by the “hands” of fate, by mercurial gods, by the always-present destiny, by monsters and men alike. I started imagining what these epics would sound like coming out of the mouths of these goddesses. I wanted to hear their side of the story—What were they feeling and what did they think about what was happening to them?

III. Moderator Questions and Discussion
1. What would you consider the central role or purpose that persona plays within both a singular poem and a longer sequential work or collection, particularly in your own work?
2. What moral or ethical obligations do you feel the poet has when writing persona poetry? Are certain subjects or speakers taboo? What is the line between adapting a voice and appropriation?
3. How can the persona “talk back to history” specifically? Where can the persona poem tow the line between historical and speculative?
4. What drew you in particular to writing in persona? How has this predilection shaped even your non-persona work?