

# BOUND TO THE PAST

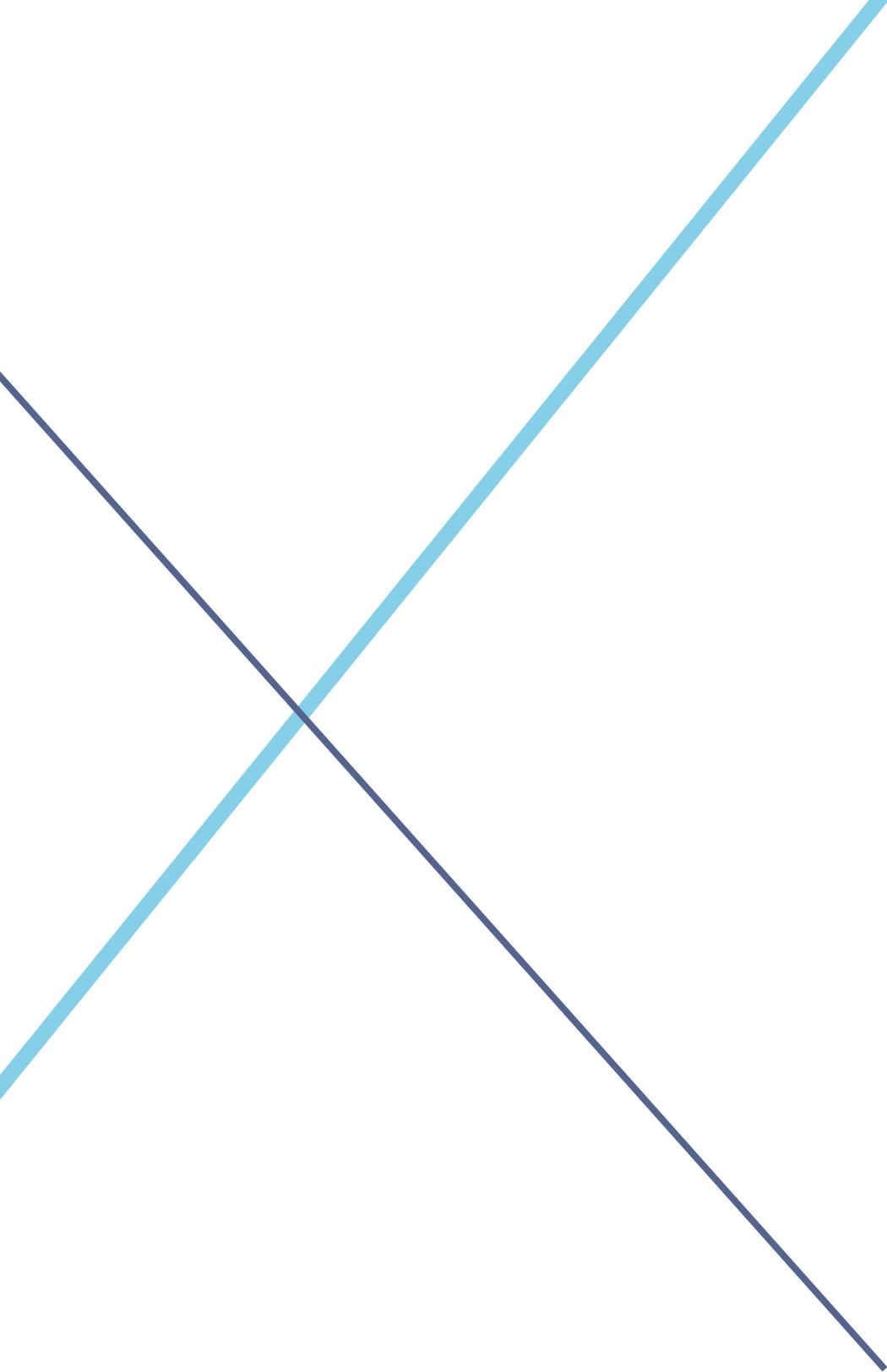
POETRY (OUT FROM) UNDER  
THE SIGN OF HISTORY

curated by  
H. L. HIX

*featuring*  
Shane McCrae  
Jena Osman

Bino A. Realuyo  
*with an afterword by*  
Aby Kaupang





# **BOUND TO THE PAST: POETRY (OUT FROM) UNDER THE SIGN OF HISTORY**

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#37

## ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press culture.

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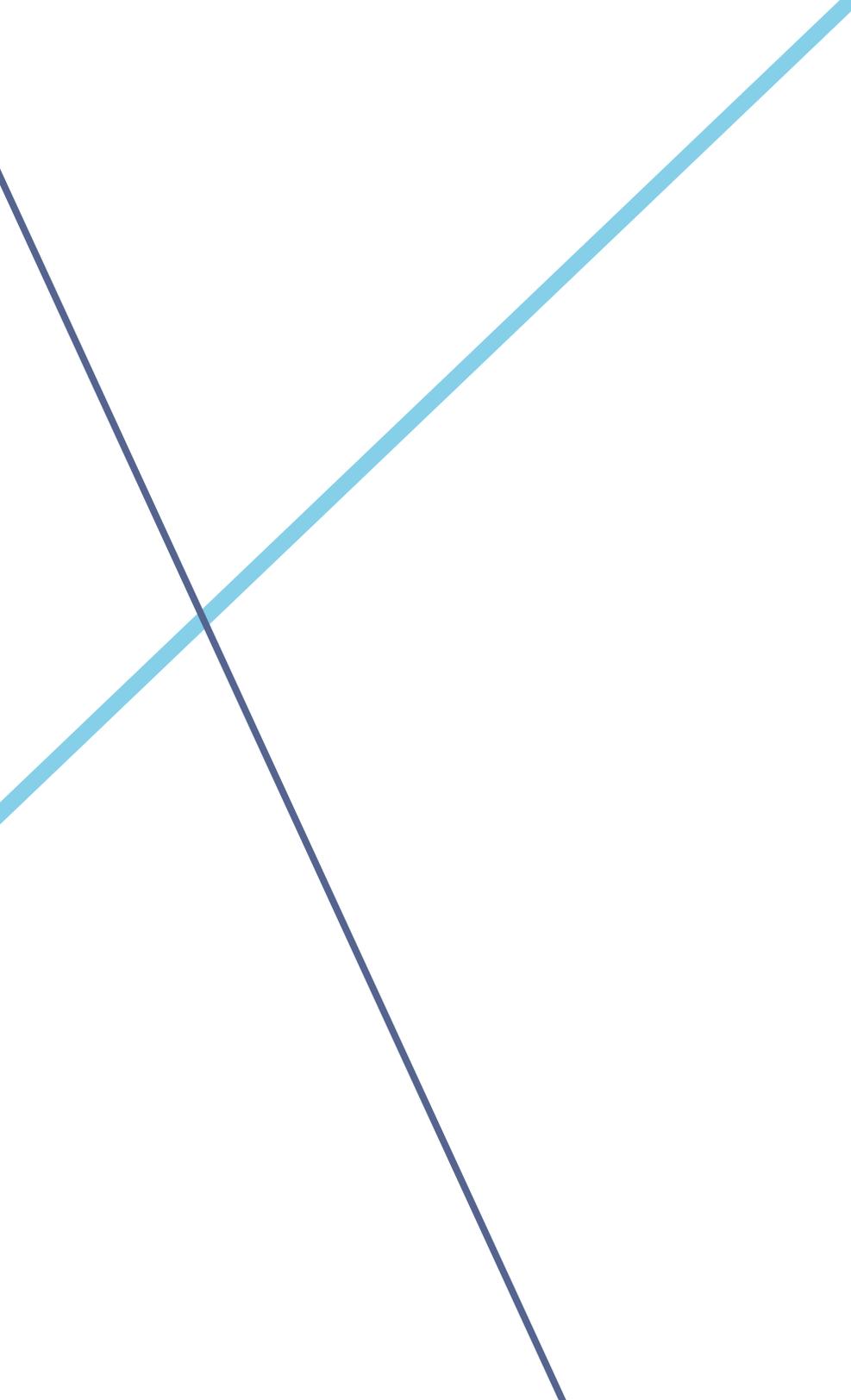
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## INTRODUCTION

— H. L. Hix

Into his scolding of the jury at the end of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates installs a fantasy: that in death he will be able to converse with great minds of the past. Curating this volume for Essay Press has afforded me the opportunity to fulfill a similar fantasy, one that involves not minds from the past but minds I admire in the present. I have never spoken in person with Shane McCrae, Jena Osman or Bino A. Realuyo, but I have followed with admiration the work of each.

Still, there are many interesting minds at work today that I would like to hear in dialogue with one another. Why put together these three in particular? I solicited interviews from them not because they knew one another, or because their poetry is alike, nor because they see things in similar ways, but simply because, however different they may be in other respects, the poetic practices of Shane McCrae, Jena Osman and Bino A. Realuyo share at least one feature: active

poetic engagement with history. I knew that anything they had to say to one another I would want to hear. In the conversations that follow, McCrae interviews Osman about her recent book *Public Figures*, Osman interviews Realuyo about his recent book *The Gods We Worship Live Next Door* and Realuyo interviews McCrae about his recent book *Blood*.

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Is poetry inferior to history, or superior to it? Plato made a case for the former, Aristotle for the latter. Their disagreement, though, has framed the question ever since as a false dilemma—one result of which is that, in much English-language poetry, the roots of which are deep in Greek soil, no assumption is more pervasive than that poetry and history oppose one another, no principle more conventional than that poetry and history are best kept apart.

Shane McCrae, Jena Osman and Bino A. Realuyo all deny that assumption, and all defy the accompanying convention. For Osman, the rationale for doing so has to do with attention: “For me personally,” she says, “the most political thing a poem can do is point—to call attention to that which is not usually attended to, to help me rethink/re-see what I thought I already knew.” For Realuyo, the rationale has to do with breadth and community: he thinks of poetry as “a tool to learn about what is happening in the rest of

the world,” and toward that end he identifies himself as “a poet of community,” and says, “I want poetry to have a larger scope and content.” For McCrae, the rationale has to do with enlarging and truing the self: he reports experiencing, when he came across the stories he develops in *Blood*, “a sudden opening up” that made him “instantly feel like I had grown larger inside.”

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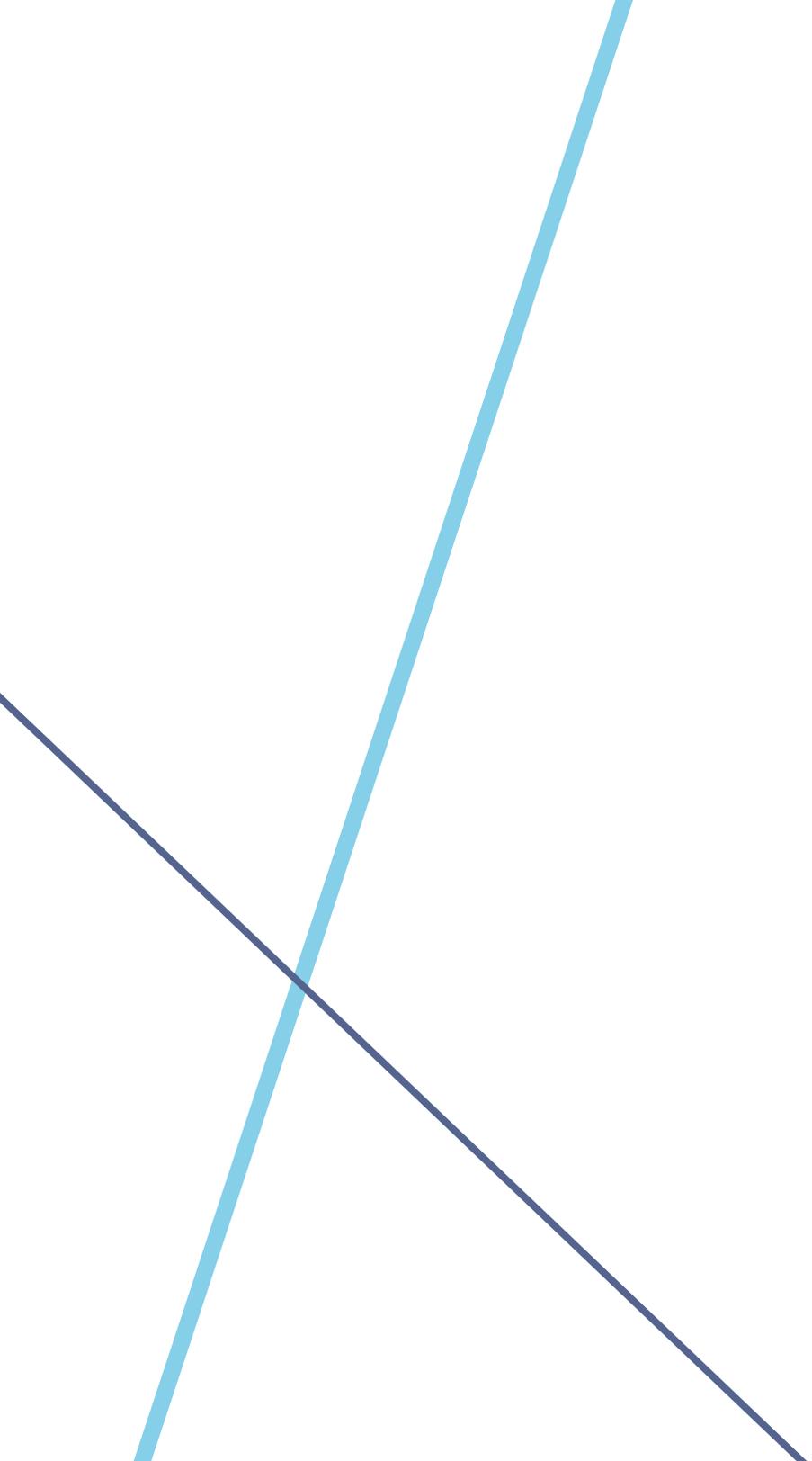
The reader will attend to the thematics here that most interest her or him, but here are a few that hold special interest for me:

- Jena Osman’s expressed concern for “the implications of seeing and the complicities of not seeing.”
- The discussion between Shane McCrae and Jena Osman about the role of information in *Public Figures*.
- Osman’s questions about what it means to look at, and what it means to *not* look at, contemporary acts of war.
- The reflection, in the discussion between McCrae and Osman, on the possibilities and liabilities of social media.

- Osman's concern over "micro-attunements toward warfulness."
- Bino A. Realuyo's sense that he often must "leave a particular life" in order to write poetry that is about others' lives.
- Realuyo's conviction that poetry can offer something news reporting lacks.
- The relation explored, in the discussion between Osman and Realuyo, between poetry's truth-telling quality and its role as a pedagogical device.
- The recurring juxtaposition in Realuyo's comments of lyric and narrative.
- Shane McCrae's sense of poetry's embeddedness in ordinary life.
- McCrae's ideal of poetic "availability."
- McCrae's understanding of obscurity (in moderation) as an invitation/provocation for the reader.

The poets here are especially alert to the methodologies in one another's work. Shane McCrae notices that Jena Osman's *Public Figures* is "made up of parallel and interwoven texts," which leads him to ask her how she envisions people reading it. Jena Osman notices that Bino A. Realuyo's *The Gods We Worship Live Next Door* draws on news stories for some of its poems, and asks how that relates to the choice of poetry as the appropriate genre. Bino A. Realuyo notices that Shane McCrae's *Blood* often adopts the point of view of its characters/subjects, and asks how that led McCrae, and how it leads the reader.

I have taken as the book's title a phrase McCrae speaks near the end of the third interview. I mean it to identify a premise that McCrae and Osman and Realuyo hold in common, namely that dialogue between poetry and history has value. As the reader will experience, so too do the dialogues McCrae and Osman and Realuyo have with one another.



SHANE MCRAE INTERVIEWS  
JENA OSMAN ON  
***PUBLIC FIGURES***

**Shane McCrae:** *Public Figures* is a text made up of parallel and interwoven texts—how do you envision people reading it? How did you decide upon the form of this book?

**Jena Osman:** I hope people will read it however they choose. I hope that, no matter how it's read (reading in order, reading just the essay parts together, reading just the ticker tape at the bottom, reading front to back or back to front), the parts will be read in relation. One of the things that interests me about history is that when we first start learning about it in school (or when we read historical plaques in a tourist town like Philly), we often learn about events as if they happened separately from one another, as if events fit into neat categories without much context. Part of that is the result of the frameworks of learning (how much can you fit into the time/space allotted), but part of that is a

kind of hierarchization of what's worth knowing. So relationships are obscured. I'm interested in cracking that open a bit by finding threads that have been dropped because they haven't fit neatly into public narratives. And I hope that my form (which puts different discourses side-by-side) allows for these threads to resonate differently than they might in a more linear sequence. I wanted to create a form that would allow the reader to find connections, to work on the relations between these facts in the same way that I was trying to do. So I use a mix of modes (essay, verse, narrative, visuals). They're all in conversation. I try to keep the relations open so that the form isn't driving the reader to some kind of predetermined conclusion.

**SM:** *Public Figures* seems to me to be primarily about seeing (and seeing seeing) and surveillance, but not about information. Information often seems, in fact, deliberately occluded. What did you want to communicate, or comment upon, by talking about seeing?

**JO:** I'm interested that you don't find the piece to be about information. Can you say more about that? Where do you see information being occluded? One of the ways the piece began was in wondering about the public statues that I pass on a daily basis, wondering why I didn't know anything about them. So a good portion of the book is reporting

the results of my research into these figures. So it feels pretty information-laden to me. But there are other sections that are less specific (the story/image/caption sequences, for instance).

Yes, I am concerned with the implications of seeing and the complicities of not seeing (or not questioning what one sees). There wasn't one singular point I was interested in making; rather, I wanted to see what would happen when I put a variety of vectors, or sightlines, up against one another. Does the sightline of a statue holding a weapon have anything to do with the soldier that statue is meant to represent? Does the sightline that I'm experiencing right now, sitting in front of my computer screen, have anything to do with the sightline of a soldier? In a direct sense, obviously not. I guess I'm asking readers to consider what connections or disconnections they may have to that military position (or what they imagine that military stance to consist of). In that thought experiment, is the soldier human? Or a static object, like a statue? If the latter, do our ways of seeing need to be re-evaluated/adjusted? This is part of a longstanding question I've had about the ways in which cultural and legal systems dehumanize while simultaneously granting human qualities to objects/non-human entities. My book *Corporate Relations* addresses this question by looking at corporate personhood and the constitutional rights granted to

corporations alongside instances where the human is treated as an abject machine.

**SM:** Ah. Well, the piece is information-laden, yes, but it doesn't seem to me to be *about* information—except insofar as it's maybe about the processing of information, mostly through seeing. Because of its foregrounding of processing information, the piece seemed to me to be more about seeing, and maybe what happens when seeing and the living body become separated. To me, the photographs of what the statues would see if they could see seemed to reinforce this: they're un-living bodies seeing living things, rather than living bodies (e.g., drone pilots) seeing things that are in some sense un-living (the pilots don't see living beings, they see digital images of living beings). There is, it seems to me, a kind of zombification that takes place in the transmission of the image to the pilot, and this zombification finds its mirror image in public statues of dead soldiers. You say you're "asking readers to consider what connections or disconnections they may have to that military position," and I wonder if you think these statues of soldiers, in particular, prepare people to see actors in military positions (the way drone pilots see their targets—as beings somehow on the other side of a living/not-living divide). Does an image, even an image of those who with premeditation have killed and/or might kill, live?

**JO:** I know that the figure of the zombie is hot right now (culturally, theoretically). But I have to admit, I am really not on top of the discourse. And I'm not sure how "zombification" works as an analogy to what I'm trying to evoke with these lines of sight/site, but it's interesting to think about.

I don't believe that when people see one of these military statues (mostly of Revolutionary and Civil War soldiers, with a rare twentieth-century soldier in the mix), they make a connection to contemporary military actors at all. The connective tissue between past and present historical events is too weak to do so—and I'm hoping *Public Figures* works to make those connections a bit more visible. Popular conceptions of the soldier tend in the direction of the frozen symbolic. Memorial Day weekend (the first official weekend of summer) recently happened, and between the weather and traffic reports were any number of tributes to "our fallen heroes," to those "who served our country," to "the brave hearts," etc. But even beyond such holiday proclamations, the language around military service is always quite detached and de-individualized: e.g., "troops." So real-life soldiers are perceived as representations just as much as these statues were at the point when they were conceived and built. And what your question seems to be suggesting is that any act of representation (the act of turning someone/something into a symbol) is a kind of zombification.

The symbol itself is the zombie, feeding off the living. And I wonder if that applies to all works of art, including poetry.

But I don't think that analogy can work unless there is some human collaboration in the mix, because symbols themselves don't need our flesh—ideologies do. In other words, I think the dehumanization (i.e., turning human into idea) that occurs in the result of any symbol-making process is problematic. But don't get me wrong: by saying that, I'm not calling for some kind of work where the lives of everyday soldiers are made "real" through an artistic rendering of human-interest stories (i.e., information?). That strategy is just as problematic, just as instrumentalizing. What I'm trying to attend to in *Public Figures* are strategies and systems—how they get used, how they become invisible. Is there a way to see them more clearly for what they are? Is there a way to see processes rather than just the results of those processes?

Another attempt to respond to your question: you seem to be talking about how turning someone into an image (via sculptural rendering, via digital transmission) deadens the subject. What I'm hoping to do in writing about these public statues out on the streets is to bring them to life, to bring them to our attention. A number of people have told me that, after reading the book, they started to actually notice these figures, to think about what they represented,

to wonder about them, to investigate them. I'm glad the book is leading to such questioning.

**SM:** In *Public Figures*, there are many photographs of statues, and many photographs of what those statues would see if they happened to be looking. How did you mean to situate readers? Did you want them to imagine themselves as the statues (is empathy important to your project—and if not, why not?), or did you want them only to see what the statues would see?

**JO:** The idea of photographing a statue's point of view began as a kind of joke. I followed that whimsical idea until it led me to other questions, such as who were these people? Why were they once considered so important though now we have no idea who they are? What does it mean to look at them? What does it mean to not look at them? If these historical statues are soldiers, what do they have in common with soldiers today? If we put a camera (or a screen) in front of an actual soldier, what does he or she see? In this age of drone technology, how have the weapons of war changed? Does our looking at actual soldiers, our witnessing of war through various media platforms, have consequences? What does it mean to look at contemporary acts of war? What does it mean to not look at them?

So I'm not sure I ever thought of the reader imagining themselves as a statue, though that's as possible as anything else. I guess I'm more interested in causing a self-awareness around the act of looking. I want to think of these statues as analogous to humans, and want to place the act of "not seeing" these statues as analogous to not seeing people you might walk by in the street, or not seeing public figures that you might read about in the news media as human, etc.

The humanizing of those whom we might not notice is certainly related to empathy. But empathy can also imply a fusing of the self with the other—a kind of relation that can colonize the other in order to make the self feel better. I'm not so interested in that kind of empathy. But I am interested in a flexible subject-position that allows for some critical distance. That's why I use the second person a lot in this book—because it can be the self and not the self. There's the "I" that is me walking through the city and researching the facts of these statues in the research sections, but then there's a shifting "you" that circulates throughout. Sometimes the "you" is a soldier. At one point it's Harry Caul (played by Gene Hackman) in the movie *The Conversation*. Sometimes it's the reader. Or one of the statues. The hope is that it's rarely singular, that it can multi-function, that it can flex from one subject to another. That multi-functioning isn't always comfortable. It can implicate; it can cause "you" to say "that's not

me," to try to distinguish your "you" from someone else's. I once presented this piece in Athens, Georgia. There's a line in the piece about how "you walk around these figures [the statues] as if they are buildings or large pieces of furniture." Someone in the audience mentioned that in the South, which is still populated by statues of Confederate soldiers, this isn't necessarily true—that for African Americans, it's impossible to walk by these monuments without feeling a punch in the gut.

I'm wondering if you would be willing to talk a little bit about your use of empathy in *Blood*. I don't know what your process was, but it seems that these stories that come from history are being retold as poems because poetic form allows for a clearer emotional connection. The poems themselves are stark/unsentimental. They sting without consolation. They reminded me a lot of the poems in Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, where criminal cases are boiled down to the emotional core of what happened. Can you talk about the relationship between the poems and the source material you were working from?

**SM:** I tried not to impose when it was possible for me not to impose. Some poems were almost entirely derived, with only very minor changes (most often for metrical reasons) from their source materials—although of course the poems are also, in a way, entirely imposition. And for some poems I had

to invent things, and I became extremely anxious whenever I found myself having to make something up in order to make a poem work. I wanted to be true, as best I could, to the sense of the person that came through the source material. Maybe the simplest way to explain what was happening with regard to empathy as I was trying to write those poems would be to say that I often felt like I was trying to listen out loud.

**JO:** This makes a lot of sense to me. It makes me think of something Allen Ginsberg wrote in an essay about Reznikoff's use of found text in *Testimony*:

everyone is yakking about how they want to show emotions in their poetry. The way he's done it is by simply being totally accurate to what stimulated the emotion in him, by observing so clearly or by being so *present* or by not trying to generalize it, but by trying to recall or reconstitute the sensation by gathering the data that caused the sensation—the objective external data—he's been able to reconstitute that sensation in us.... By reconstituting the primary sensory data, Reznikoff has been able to transfer the emotional affective blood-gush into our bodies.

**SM:** You say there are many "yous" in the book. How do you make this multiplicity apparent to the reader? Is it important that the reader recognizes this multiplicity?

**JO:** Your question makes me wonder whether it's actually working. Just on a language level, it's impossible not to project the self into the second person, even though the "you" might clearly not be you. I feel like there are a number of moments where there can be some easy identifications (for instance, "You wonder how a weapon, and the body that carries it, can become so neutralized"), where the reader can say "Yes, I've wondered that too." And those moments are mixed with statements that are more character-based and removed: "If it hadn't been for a lucky break (which you failed to mention in your report) you might not be where you are today," or "You set the timer and pull the pin." And there's the "you" of the drone pilot, who is also the "you" of a statue: "with thickened blood, metallic skin, and granite / breath, you look to the screen and see." And so on. So yes, the multiplicity is important, and hopefully performed by the structures I work with, because if it were a singular "you" (a character only) then "you," the reader, would just be a voyeur, not at all implicated in this world. And if "you" referred only to the reader, then the reader would just be a wild narcissist. I'm not even sure how that latter reading could be possible! Although the second person has

different implications in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, I really love what Erica Hunt says about how the "you" is deployed in that book: "It hangs commanding, accusative, or adoring. It's the pointed end of the syntactic stick, drilling the question or demanding an observation."

**SM:** *Public Figures* seems to suggest that we are moving toward (or already occupy) a world in which seeing one's actions has to some extent become separated from the doing itself. How do you see this manifesting itself in the ways we Americans think about our place in the world and especially our wars? How do you see this manifesting itself in our day-to-day lives?

**JO:** What is an example of "seeing one's actions... become separated from the doing itself"? Are you referring to the way drones are flown, where operators can see what's happening halfway around the world, can initiate an act of war in a locale where they aren't actually present? I suppose that since the Civil War, to live in the United States is always to live in a place that is separated from the physical instance of its military acts. And how does this forever-distance correlate to our day-to-day lives? That's an interesting question. Perhaps social media is where what happens in a virtual sphere can be very different than what happens "on the ground"?

**SM:** I was, yes, referring to the separation between pilot and drone. But I think many of us see the same kind of separation (albeit in a much less lethal situation) daily, or almost daily. For example: I post a status on Facebook, and in perhaps the most easily understandable sense, as I post the status I am seeing myself doing that action. However, if somebody then "likes" that status a few minutes later, I am in another sense seeing my action being done anew, in a placeless (digital) place, as it is responded to. And we cannot know the effect of what we say immediately, as we might if we were having a face-to-face conversation. Does social media desensitize us in a way that makes us more suitable to participate in drone-based warfare?

**JO:** That is a really interesting and complicated question. I have a range of responses that I haven't thoroughly worked out, so what follows might be a bumpy ride.... Although writing a Facebook post isn't at all comparable to a drone strike, it seems to me that there are three commonalities between Facebook posters and drone pilots: they're not in harm's way; they don't see the face/humanity of a person who's being attacked; and there's often unintended collateral damage. But perhaps that's too simplistic.

Another way of asking your question might be: do our personal "non-lethal" relations somehow

model our governmental/military relations? I've written elsewhere about Joan Retallack's utopian concept of "poethics" and the idea that artworks can model a world in which one might like to live. What your question suggests is that the equation might be flipped, as a by-product of our tech-mediated culture, with decidedly non-utopian results. The way you're paralleling social-media participation with state-sponsored (or corporate-sponsored) violence is interesting to think about. Once people participate, can they really control the consequences? I'm not so sure. Retallack often talks about John Cage's chance procedures in relation to the butterfly effect in chaos theory. She refers to him setting up "positive" initial conditions, with the hope that the spirit of those initial conditions will carry forward into the resulting actions—but you really can't predict. Is a posting on Facebook a similar "initial condition"? Again, I'm uncertain of the analogy (and it seems important to note here that Cage's goal was to remove the ego from choice, whereas Facebook seems to be all about ego-informing choice).

Right now in the poetry world (as refracted through social media), I see a lot of different tactics being used in response to racism and oppression. The problem for me is that social media doesn't seem to allow for the kind of clarity that face-to-face conversation does. And by clarity, I don't mean the certainty of statement, but rather the continuous

(and messy) shifting of relations that comes while navigating towards a new understanding.

But social media is serving a different purpose right now. That difference was clear to me when I participated in CAConrad's PACE (Poet Activist Community Extension) project this past winter. A group of poets in Philadelphia gathered with broadsides and set out to read poems to anyone who would listen. It was the coldest day of the year, so that might have had something to do with the fact that we had a hard time getting anybody to listen and talk to us. But even if the weather had been better, I'm an extremely shy person, and this kind of action goes against my nature. It's much easier to sit behind a screen and post. And when I think of how CAConrad uses his social-media feed, it's clear that he can make his voice heard in a way that it never could be on a real-life street.

Another way into your question: are people online inhabiting a different state of consciousness than when they are in "real life"? Amidst the barrage of baby pictures, cat pictures and political screeds, are social-media users finding a way to express something that they can't elsewhere? Or, more cynically, is a "riot" on social media just a corporate heat sink, keeping users from the real riots while they stay closer to the ads for socks in their sidebars?

Are Facebook controversies serving advertisers more than actual causes?

If it isn't clear already, I'm finding your conception of how social media works (where reposting can become a kind of "desensitized" replacement for actual conversation) very provocative.

**SM:** You don't include any stills of the YouTube videos from which you extracted the text you call "drone text." Why is this? Is seeing through a drone a different kind of seeing?

**JO:** *Public Figures* started out as a PowerPoint slide lecture—it had many more images than the book does, including a lot of news photos and photos I had taken of people on the street. And in that iteration, it didn't have the drone component. When I started to adapt the presentation for the page, I had to let a lot of the images go (because of space concerns and permission issues), and I found that the piece lost some of its energy. It started to feel too monotone, and I wanted something to add dimensionality and complicate the ideas further. I kept thinking about modes of looking, and at the time I was obsessing over the mechanics of drone warfare. It still seems so unbelievable to me that someone can sit at a screen and "play" war like a video game, even though strategies of warring and gaming have always been connected. The documentary imagery of the news

photos was replaced with the YouTube transcription in order to put present-day soldiers in proximity to the historical depictions of war heroes. As for why I didn't include a still: I think it probably had to do with not knowing where to place it. Most of the images are attached to the "essay" voice until near the end. Meanwhile, those fuzzy infrared aerial images of small figures being targeted onscreen are pretty well in the public consciousness—at least since Chelsea Manning's video leaks. When you read this text, I hope those images come to mind.

**SM:** As a follow-up to the previous question: are the statues in *Public Figures*, effectively, drones?

**JO:** I'm curious how you think that might work? Are you suggesting that the statues are analogically being "piloted" by an external operator to drop ideological bombs on a landscape? Again, I'm not sure that analogy can hold up, in that the propaganda these statues communicate is not at all comparable to the carnage caused by a drone. But maybe I'm misunderstanding your question.

**SM:** I think I meant: are they drones insofar as they see, but only if people are present to interpret their seeing? I think the photographing of a statue's view is a kind of interpretation of seeing, and if nobody were present to see the feed from a drone, the feed would not be seen, only transmitted (and—but I'm

not sure whether this always happens—recorded). I guess my worry is that our public spaces seem often to surround us unwittingly with atmospheres of warfulness, and that these atmospheres eventually change the way we breathe (if, indeed, it can meaningfully be said that we have ever breathed outside them). What I am thinking of might be easier to conceptualize (I'm not sure I have a handle on it) as something akin to micro-aggressions. I am thinking of micro-attunements toward warfulness. And with that in mind, it seems to me especially significant that these statues often do not meet our gaze—eye contact would seem like coercion toward patriotic warfulness. Do these statues look away from us in part because we are meant to look toward, to in that sense desire toward, them?

**JO:** “Atmospheres eventually change the way we breathe”: that's beautifully said. I think you're right that there are these small signals in public space and public discourse that anesthetize us to (or make us complicit with) the rhetorics of war. Memorials like the ones I focus on are attached mostly to nineteenth-century rhetorics. What are the twenty-first-century rhetorics that we should be attuned to? Video gaming is an obvious answer, and the reductive logics of nearly all entertainment and news feeds. But I think you're asking us to think about less obviously coercive “atmospheres” that we might not immediately connect to war culture. I tried to

figure out what those might be in a talk I gave at the 2013 &Now conference for a panel (organized by Hilary Plum) on aesthetic responses to “the so-called war on terror.” I ended up focusing on algorithms, dataveillance and profiling. The algorithms that determine our Amazon and Netflix suggestions are connected to the algorithms that sift through our phone records and our search terms—and they actively collect the details of our identities every hour for the purposes of commerce and governmental surveillance. Every electronic move you make is part of a data set. Is there a way to not participate in that atmosphere? Or to disrupt/repurpose it? In a piece called “Drone Poetics,” Carmen Giménez Smith wrote “We need to watch [the government]. Record them, poeticize our watching and recording. We need to take their data from them, reshape it, deform it, defamiliarize it. We have to respond to government surveillance with our own forms of surveillance. We have to watch them back.”

**SM:** Is the age of drone warfare the age of “action no longer / sensation?”

**JO:** In that line (which concludes the book) I guess I'm stating that idea and questioning it at the same time. Drone technology does seem to give us permission to disassociate and “not see” the wars our government is engaged in. But that's been around since “shock and awe” and other fantasies

of technologically “clean” wars. On the other hand, I feel like we’re in a massively sensitized moment where *feeling* is being recognized as a result of the structures and systems our lives are being constrained/controlled by.

**SM:** As a follow-up to the previous question: can poems restore the connection between sensation and action? Or are poems only capable of pointing out the disconnect?

**JO:** I can only answer this for myself: while I certainly think that poems can create sensation (and sensitize), I’m not so sure I have experienced an instance where such sensation connects directly to, or changes, the way I move through the world on an everyday basis. For example, reading Evelyn Reilly’s book *Styrofoam* has certainly made me think a lot about that eco-toxic substance, but a newspaper article on how plastic is no longer being recycled because of cheap petroleum prices is probably more likely to get me to stop using plastic. On the other hand, poems have often caused me to see things differently and have caused me to ask questions—those seem like pretty important actions. But they’re not enough to dismantle the system(s) that caused the disconnect between sensation and action in the first place.

**SM:** What, if any, is the political role of the contemporary American poet?

**JO:** Is it OK if I change the word “poet” to “poem”? I feel like political work is being done in so many ways in poetry right now. I couldn’t possibly say what *the* political role is, as I think different poets will have different answers. For me personally, the most political thing a poem can do is to point—to call attention to that which is not usually attended to, to help me rethink/re-see what I thought I already knew. It’s also a form that allows for openness and incompleteness, for process and readjustment, for radical uncertainty and unlikely hypotheses. In other words: it’s a space for experiment in a world that often doesn’t seem to have much patience for ambiguity or complexity. Most of my poems are research-based, and in each one I think I’m trying to find new contact points in a socio-political landscape that makes it difficult to connect the dots (or asks me to connect them in one particular way).

I’m curious how you would answer this question yourself.

**SM:** Perhaps ironically, I (at least at the moment) would say that the most necessary political work a poem can do is a kind of micro-attuning. Which is maybe scary! I like to think that poems, when they allow, as you said, “for openness and incompleteness, for process and readjustment, for radical uncertainty and unlikely hypotheses,” help human beings to themselves be more open, and I like to think that

more openness leads to more lovingness. I don't know that history bears this out (did societies behave any better when more of their members read poems), but I do believe poems perhaps make the inclination toward love stronger, and that becomes more necessary every day.

**JO:** I agree with you absolutely. Thank you so much for this conversation.

**SM:** Thanks for talking with me, Jena.

JENA OSMAN INTERVIEWS  
BINO A. REALUYO ON  
***THE GODS WE WORSHIP  
LIVE NEXT DOOR***

**Jena Osman:** Would you be willing to talk a bit about some of your literary influences? Are there other poets out there who address history that you see as models? I found myself thinking often about Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* while reading *The Gods We Worship Live Next Door*. While Rukeyser is an outside observer of injustice (as opposed to a victim of it herself), she humanizes the miners of Gauley Junction, gives them voice through lyric. I also found myself thinking a lot about Kamau Brathwaite's *Trench Town Rock* because of the relentless violence, his poems trying to find a form that can match the horror of events. Also Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* and its critique of imperialism.

**Bino A. Realuyo:** What seems like a simple question is so difficult to answer. I really need to jog my memory on this one. Well, in my literary work, I have what I call my "spiritual guides." These are

writers whose books and works accompany me in my travels. Since I have always had a full-time job outside the literary world, I travel to write. During the 10-year period it took to write *The Gods We Worship Live Next Door*, I used to travel with a set of Pablo Neruda books, mostly his bilingual editions, especially *Residence on Earth*. I also traveled with the works of Czeslaw Milosz (e.g., *Unattainable Earth*) and Theodore Roethke. I read them not because they influence me, but mostly because they open the doors for me when it's time to write poetry, when I have to go into the "zone." Having "multiple" lives, I have to leave a particular life to enter a poetic zone and write, and it's not always easy switching rooms. Sometimes I need to ask permission to enter. Sometimes I have to knock on the poetic door.

Also, in the 1990s when I started writing the collection, I searched bookstores for politically oriented poetry collections. I carefully studied what was out there in terms of poetic production. I studied the usual—Ai's books, Carolyn Forché (her first book and her *Against Forgetting: Poetry of Witness* anthology), Sonia Sanchez, etc. There weren't many political poets, but it was important for me to know how these poems were being written. I also studied poetry written in English by Filipinos, to find some sort of a relationship with my own history. I mostly found these poets in anthologies, as their individual collections were rare. I would also learn later that

there was a category for the work that I write: "witness poetry." Eventually, none of that mattered. What became more important for me was that I had to tell these stories, and as a poet-novelist, the best way for me to do that was through lyric narratives.

**JO:** Is there a book of contemporary poetry that you've read recently that you've found interesting/useful?

**BR:** Not really. I have been reading classic sonneteers: Petrarch, Shakespeare, e. e. cummings, Sor Juana, etc.

**JO:** I'm very interested in the way you use poetry to illuminate current and historical events. The poems in the "Witness" section seem to all be pulled directly from news stories. Can you speak about why you think poetry is an appropriate genre for this kind of material? What does "witnessing" in poetic form offer that's different than what we get through news coverage?

**BR:** Unfortunately, news reporting has no soul. I am a product of the times. In the 1990s, when I graduated from college, I became a political activist in New York City. I was especially keen about what was happening in the Philippines, my country of birth, and the relationship between that country and the U.S. I was very aware of the "overseas foreign worker" (OFW)

situation, as 10 percent of the population of the Philippines worked overseas, in mostly downtrodden work situations. While I'm an immigrant and not an OFW, I find kinship with them. I wrote the poems first before I fact-checked with news articles. The news tidbits in the epigraph and the "Notes" were additions when the poems were finished. I put these there because readers respond differently to media truths. If they knew these people were real and were in the news, they would more likely pay attention. I also didn't want the poems to end with the last line. I want readers to go back and find these people. If the news articles exist, chances are these people could still be researched. When I first wrote the book, my epigraph's fact about how much money the OFWs send to the Philippines in remittances was around \$5 billion. It has grown to \$17 billion as of last year. There are more human rights abuses against Filipinas who work in the Middle East and Asia. The stories repeat. The abuses repeat. We haven't learned our lessons.

**JO:** Is there a reason that poetry is a more apt mode for telling these stories than prose fiction? What does poetry allow for that prose does not? How would you describe the differences between what you do in your fiction writing and what you do in your poetry writing?

**BR:** Poetry is truth-telling. Fiction is my way of going crazy and doing a lot of crazy stuff.

**JO:** It seems to me that part of your book's "mission" is pedagogical—to educate readers (particularly American readers: English is used exclusively in the poems) not familiar with the history of the Philippines. In the poem "From a Filipino Death March Survivor Whose World War II Benefits Were Rescinded by the U.S. Congress in 1946" you pretty much spell it out: "I don't know why Americans don't know this happened." That statement can apply to much more in Filipino history than the Rescission Act of 1946, and the book, with its epic historical arc, tries to correct that problem. How did you decide how much information to put in and how much to leave out?

**BR:** When I was writing the book, I wasn't really thinking of the big picture, unlike when I write fiction—where I see the end of the story all the time. There was no historical arc until the manuscript was completed and I had to arrange the poems in order for publication. The first many years that I sent out the book to competitions, I didn't have the historical markers in the chapters. Being an insider, I thought naturally that I was understood. It finally dawned on me, after being a finalist for competitions so many times and not having won one, that readers don't get what I write about. I added the historical placeholders to make it easier for readers to

understand the historical scope of the work. When I did that, I won a national competition.

We can't always assume our readers will work so hard to understand what we write about. It's hard enough to read poetry, much less poetry with a historical bent. When I read in public I always tell a story first to contextualize my work, so it is better absorbed when I read a poem. I do that especially with the poem about my father. That poem wasn't in the original manuscript. I was advised before publication to remove a long poem about World War II, but I felt I had to have my father's voice in my book. So one evening, I prayed to my late father and asked him to help me write this piece. I woke up the following day and wrote a list poem—which was remarkably different in tone from the rest of the book. When I read the book in public, I teach and I see my father smiling at me. I continue his work of storytelling about World War II, his experiences, his suffering. I'm an educator. I do hope that poetry is a tool to learn about what is happening in the rest of the world. Filipinos need to know about and own their truths as much as Americans need to revisit truths that they know little about.

**JO:** The long title poem of your book starts with two epigraphs. The first is from the poem by Bienvenido Santos that gives your poem/book its name. Could

you say something about Santos's poem and why you chose it for the title of your book?

**BR:** Bienvenido Santos is one of my literary fathers. I am tracing my tradition by choosing the title of his poem for my book. The manuscript went through several titles, but I was never happy with any of them until I read Bienvenido Santos's poem from an anthology by another Filipino American poet and friend, Luis Francia. The title makes complete sense for the ending chapter of the collection. I was always writing about gods who live around us, and how we let them ruin us and never see the permission we have given them.

**JO:** The second epigraph to your title poem is a quote from Amnesty International that grounds the poem in the contemporary conflict between Islamic separatists and the Philippine armed forces. As I imagine this situation might not be familiar to everyone reading this interview, could you give some of the background?

**BR:** My maternal family is from Mindanao, the biggest of the three largest islands in the Philippines, specifically from a region called Zamboanga. I have never been there but I always felt very close to it spiritually. Mindanao is the mother of all conflicts in the Philippines, be it spiritual, national, religious, personal or cultural. It is the only Islamic region in

a predominantly Catholic country. It is the site of centuries-long conflict between Spain's Christianity and the region's Islam.

Filipinos as colonized people don't understand the significance of the Islamic resistance against colonization, authority and power in Mindanao. They simply see Muslims as troublemakers and, therefore, don't claim them as their own. Through the decades since the colonization by the U.S., the Muslims have been labeled, depending on what is trendy for the period, as "Communists" during the Cold War and as "terrorists" in the present era. Before the final chapter, two other poems address this region: "Witness" and "Sultan Kudarat." What is so hard to explain in regular reporting (or in a conversation such as this one) could be aggrandized in two lines of poetry. And I think such is the power of a poem. As in "Sultan Kudarat":

We are tired now, old. There is barely food  
here to nourish  
our legends, no lands to carry the weight of  
water and seeds.

Sometimes the conflict is just about basic rights of people. Sometimes it's just about food.

**JO:** Which leads me to a more complicated/flailing question that's connected to my previous ones. The title poem of your book references a specific

situation of conflict through its second epigraph, and yet the poem itself is told in a somewhat "mythic" language, where iconic (generic?) mothers and children represent victims of a more generalized violence. This same strategy is used in the poem "Lunar Eclipse." I'm curious about the relationship between the specific and the general, the topical and the "universal" that you're creating. I'm also thinking about Grace Schulman's blurb on the back of the book that praises your ability to transform "modern horror into art." What are the ethics of that? I'm asking because this is something I think about all the time in relation to my own projects. How can poetry enact a politics that isn't merely aestheticizing, merely making a violent situation safe for a reader? Is there a way to bring the reader closer to the situation without making it "culinary"? I'm using that word because I'm thinking of Bertolt Brecht's critique of the culinary theater, where the spectator/reader simply enjoys and consumes without thinking critically, without making analogies between what's in the theater and what's outside of it. Is this something you struggle with as well?

**BR:** I will leave the analysis of my work to scholars. I am not an academic. I am a poet of community. I don't have an MFA and don't subscribe to the industry. So I don't really study my work in that way. But this I know: I want poetry to have a larger scope and context. I want poets to get out of the poetry-

industrial complex and leave their alliances and loyalties and take risks. I want poets to be not too conscious of how their work is received or acclaimed. The world is so big and could use poets to interpret the challenges for the human soul. It boggles me to no end, this identity politics and Confessional poetic trend. When I wrote these poems, I was aware of the role I played as the writer, the one whose pen was a sword. It was the same role as the director who made a movie about Flor Contemplacion (*Singapore Sunday*). History keeps repeating itself. We are not learning from our mistakes. When I wrote "Discovery of Skin," pedophiles were frequenting Pagsanjan Falls in Luzon, which has been monitored since. I read today on [Al Jazeera](#) about a new generation of children born to the booming sex-tourism industry. According to the article, many of the sex workers are minors. It's a never-ending cycle of violence. We all need to address it as a community. As an artist, it is also my role to contribute to stopping human-rights abuses every possible way I can. But I have to do it in a way that I consider accessible to poetry readers. I don't embellish my poems with highfalutin words, so that readers end up focusing on language instead of context. I tell stories in lyric form. I want the poems absorbed. I want them to remain in the reader's consciousness. I want these tragedies to become familiar again. If I can do that, I have accomplished my task.

**JO:** For the record, I don't "subscribe to the industry" either (although I happen to teach in an MFA program for my job). But I'll try to restate my question: what does it mean to take the horrors of the world and turn them into art? To craft them without turning them into a gentler fiction? Or is fictionalizing (poeticizing?) necessary in order to cause something to lodge in the reader's consciousness? Again, I feel like I'm blundering towards my question. I think what I'm asking has to do with your comment about wanting readers to focus on context rather than language. Is it even possible not to focus on language when you're reading a poem? I'm also, again, thinking of Rukeyser and how in order to communicate the Gauley Junction mining tragedy in *The Book of the Dead*, she threaded the documentary sections with a lyrical narration around the trope of glass, and how I struggle trying to understand the relationship between this beautiful lyricism and the horrific injustice of that incident.

**BR:** Anyone who is on social media, like Facebook, as often as I am would probably agree that the world is full of horror. We are invaded by one horrifying thing after another on a daily basis. I think we have become numb to these horrors. At the same time, many people are in denial that such horrifying stories happen on our clock. So the question is: how do we choose which ones to remember so that one story can teach a lesson, and ensure this horror doesn't

happen again? I think what I'm trying to accomplish with the poems in the book is to remind readers about the thread of violence throughout the history of the Filipino people, and to offer some hope that this cycle of violence could actually be stopped. Again, stories about human-rights abuses against Filipino OFWs shouldn't just appear in the news. Movies should be made about them. Books should be written about them. They should be in our music. They should be in our poetry.

**JO:** You say you are a "poet of community." Can you describe how you perceive of that community? What does community mean for you?

**BR:** There are many different kinds of communities obviously, but when I talk about "communities," I often refer to those outside of academic literary establishments—I see ordinary people gathering around a long table discussing regular people issues. I am inspired by stories of real life: street life, work life, hoods, etc. When I travel the world, I spend a lot of time getting to know the regular Joes of the country. They inspire me. While I get sucked into intellectual and scholarly circles once in a while, I try to avoid them as much as I can, although they can be amusing.

**JO:** Do you see a difference between political poetry and activist politics? Can poetry stop human-rights

abuses, or is it just one tool for you in a multi-form activist practice?

**BR:** Art can be a tool for consciousness-raising. I have seen a lot of social commentary in visual arts. I think the same can be achieved in poetry. But it has to be written with care and grace. I have read a lot of political poetry that sounds like trumpeting, all sound bites, no soul.

**JO:** How does poetry teach differently than a teacher in the classroom?

**BR:** For me, poetry is such a private act. I actually prefer reading poetry than listening to a poet read his/her work. I can't write without reading. It's almost always the first thing I do before I write or edit my work. Poetry opens doors in my brain that I don't know are even there. I am an educator, but I don't think all teachers can do that—open secret doors, I mean.

**JO:** Can you talk about your next poetry collection? I read that it will focus on your father's experiences during World War II.

**BR:** Right now I'm finishing a collection titled "The Rebel Sonnets," a collection of 99 sonnets that I wrote over a 15-year period. I am also working on another more innovative project called "The

War Theory.” The latter will explore the genesis of war in the human soul, and will include my father’s experiences during World War II. I have been reading a lot about war. I collect war books. I have been writing about them as well. It’s my way of honoring my father and my heritage. I grew up in veteran hospitals, because my father was always in them. I have met many veterans in my lifetime. They are the most honorable people.

**JO:** Harvey Hix put our three books together because we all address history through poetry. Each book tells stories, tries to uncover hidden or forgotten truths in “absorbable” poetic forms (although you might have a different read on the level of “accessibility” in each). Each avoids the personal/Confessional “trend” you mention. And yet our books are very different in their approaches, and perhaps ask their readers to respond in different ways. How would you like the reader of your work to respond?

**BR:** I want my readers to read, think and hopefully take action to make the world a better place. It sounds clichéd, but the more we learn about our historical horrors/errors, the better equipped we are in making sure they don’t happen again.

BINO A. REALUYO INTERVIEWS  
SHANE MCRAE ON  
**BLOOD**

**Bino A. Realuyo:** First, thank you, Shane, for this rare gift. I say “rare” because in the current trend of identity-based and confessional poetry, it has become almost impossible to find a poet who writes about socio-historical matters and does it really well. Your poems are carefully picked narratives, many written from the point of view of the slaves—a whole chorus of people witnessing through time. How did this concept emerge in your mind/life/work? How did you begin to write this? What was the motivation behind the writing? What were you thinking would be at the end of the book? Or in the middle of writing this collection?

**Shane McCrae:** So, stupidly, I decided to answer this question last. And now it seems like I’ve answered a lot of what you ask here in my later responses. But I can address the last part. Hmm. I guess I always thought “Brother” would be at the end of the

book—just because I wanted to arrange the book chronologically. But the very last poem (“After the Uprising”) I didn’t write until, like, four months before the book went into print. And after I had written it, I couldn’t imagine anything else at the end of the book. And the folks at Noemi Press, whom I love, were kind enough to allow me to add the poem. As for the middle of the book: I guess I don’t know. I think of the slave narratives as the middle, kind of, and I guess if I were to think about it I would say that they’re there because *Blood* is a book about slavery, ultimately. But they’re also there because that’s where they happened to land when I put the book together. Man, I ain’t got no fancy, what do you call ‘em? Ideas.

**BR:** At the end of *Blood*, a reader can’t help but realize that s/he has read or arrived at a complete “whole.” As a poet who also writes about historical voices, I know that I was particularly conscious not so much of the whole that bring the voices together, but more of the specific people I wanted to write about. Were you also conscious about the moments in history you wrote about? How did you choose these “moments”? How did you choose these voices? Who are these people to you? What is your relationship with them?

**SM:** I don’t want to romanticize the process, but I can only answer the question honestly by saying that I

most often felt like the “moments” and voices were choosing me. However poets, for whatever reason, often seem inclined to discover a divine mandate in coincidence, and probably that’s what was happening. After *Mule* was taken by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center, I felt keenly that I would have to discover a new way to approach writing poems if I was going to make a second book that would be sufficiently different from my first book to justify its existence. One day, while I was worrying about what to write, I happened to stumble across Steven Weisenburger’s book *Modern Medea*, which is something of a biography of the legal life and times of Margaret Garner, by whom Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* was inspired. I did a bit of research, and then decided I wanted to write a poem about Garner. That poem became several poems, and for a while I thought my next book would be all poems about Garner. But I couldn’t manage that, and soon was stuck again. Then I discovered the Federal Writers’ Project and wrote a few poems based on the slave narratives gathered by the Project. It was at this point that I realized I wanted the entire book to be a research-based account of blacks in America in the nineteenth century and the early-twentieth century. And, uh, that’s how it happened.

**BR:** Are we going to read more about Garner in your works in future? What are you working on now?

**SM:** I don't expect I'll be writing more about Margaret Garner specifically. It would be weird, I think, to try to open that voice up again, and probably it would just turn out bad. And *Blood*, anyway, kind of has a kind of sequel already, maybe. *Forgiveness Forgiveness*, my third book, is basically a sequel, in a way—at least, it feels like a sequel to me. I guess what I mean is: *Forgiveness Forgiveness* takes up *Blood's* concerns (as well as its violent imagery) and tries to move those toward, well, forgiveness.

**BR:** Just out of curiosity, what is a poet's life like on your side of the universe? Some readers are curious when poetry happens in poets who lead many lives.

**SM:** I think my life is a fairly ordinary life—at least, I hope it is. I go to work every day. I worry about my kids. My partner and I try to find time to be together. Poetry happens all the time in the midst of that life. It is part of the ordinariness of that life. I don't have time for any sort of writing rituals. I just try to be available to the possibility of writing at all times. In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James advised writers to be "people on whom nothing is lost," and I've taken that to mean one should try to be always available.

**BR:** Continuing the last question, I'm curious about your role, the poet's role. What was your role in the historical arc of the book? Where is the poet in the

collection? Where do you place yourself? Who is the poet in the collection?

**SM:** I guess it's me at the end. The sequence at the end of the book is about me and my brother, and so I guess, yeah—that's where I am. I was a little worried about those poems—or, more precisely, I was worried about putting myself in the book in that way. *Mule* was a largely autobiographical book, and, as I mentioned, I wanted to do something different with *Blood*, but eventually I realized that I needed, if I was going to try to tell a story about slavery in the United States, to add something contemporary.

**BR:** The book begins with a quote from an editor at the Federal Writers' Project about...language. Indeed, there is a great deal of importance given to language and authenticity of voices throughout the narratives. Could you tell us more about the Federal Writers' Project? What is it and how did it come about?

**SM:** I'm no expert on the Federal Writers' Project. All I know is that it was one of FDR's New Deal initiatives, and it involved sending folks (mostly white folks, but also well-known black authors) around the country to, among other projects, interview former slaves about their time in bondage.

**BR:** And as a follow-up question, how does a poet recover the language of an ex-slave? Has authentic language been missing in slave narratives in American literature?

**SM:** I don't know how a poet would do it. But I do know that I couldn't do it, and I'm glad I didn't really try. Whenever I was adapting a slave narrative, I would do my best to imitate the language of the narrative itself, and most of the time I just straight-up used the language of the narrative itself—but I don't consider that recovery, really, because that language was already out there. I don't think authentic language has been missing from slave narratives, no, since many slave narratives were written by the former slaves themselves, and so (at least with regard to those that weren't heavily edited/rewritten before publication) the language is their language.

**BR:** I appreciate your notes section at the end. I have five pages of notes in my own poetry collection. I thought it was necessary for your book to have one. It is almost impossible these days to assume that readers of poetry, or readers of any other literary genres, understand history. When I finally got to the notes section, I went back and reread the book. Naturally, I read it differently now that I have a better historical context. For instance, without the notes, I wouldn't have known who Cathay Williams was—although I would have enjoyed the poem

nonetheless. Why did you choose to add a notes section? Why did you choose to have a notes section as opposed to endnotes after each poem for easy reference? I noticed there were no notes attached to chapter five. Was this intentional? Do you think poems of historical nature can stand alone without the added context in the notes?

**SM:** The fifth section didn't have notes because it was about me and my family, and I didn't feel like I really needed to contextualize those poems further. However, I felt notes were important for the other sections, in part because black history has often been elided and erased, and I wanted to do my very small part to give it space. Also I thought a lot of the people and incidents in the book might be unfamiliar to readers, and it seemed like a good idea to provide notes that would point the way to further reading and research. It never occurred to me, though, to use endnotes after each poem. I guess I'm not usually a fan of endnotes in books of poetry—at least I'm not a fan of them when they're not, you know, part of the poem. I find them disruptive.

**BR:** Also in the notes section, there is a short list of sources or reading materials that, as I understand, were critical in the writing of the poems. I am curious about the genesis of ideas in your work. Do these nonfiction sources serve as inspiration for the writing of your poems? How does the process of creating

these voices begin or happen for you? What is the purpose of selecting these specific voices and not others?

**SM:** Mostly, as I mentioned, I came across my stories accidentally. I don't know whether I would say I was inspired—although, yeah, I guess the feeling I often had was something like inspiration, a sudden opening up. I never understand how it is that I write about whatever it is I happen to write about. When I was working on *Blood*, I would come across a story and instantly feel like I had grown larger inside. I would feel my chest expanding, and that was how I knew I could begin to write a poem about the story.

**BR:** I'd like to delve deeper into you as a poet. How did poetry begin in your life?

**SM:** By the time I was 15 years old, I had given up on life. Actually, I had given up on life years before, but by the time I was 15 I had truly settled into my surrender. I had no interest in anything besides skateboarding, and even though I was good at it, I knew skateboarding wasn't going to make my life (I still do it, though—update: later, the same day I wrote “I still do it, though,” I twisted my knee skateboarding in a way that made me think, *Now maybe I'm done*). I had failed every grade from the sixth grade up, and I was only attending school because I was too young to drop out. And then

one day I saw an after-school special that featured, among other things (and really, “featured” isn't the right word: perhaps “tolerated” would have been better), a few lines from Sylvia Plath's “Lady Lazarus”: “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well.” I heard those, and wow! It was like the whole world started over for me. I wrote eight terrible poems that day, and within a few months (after a hiccup that involved moving from one city to another and realizing I was finally going to have to repeat a grade, the tenth grade) I had decided that poetry was what I wanted to do with my life.

**BR:** In terms of voices, I was especially haunted by the chorus of truths in section one. Terrance Hayes mentioned Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in his blurb for your book. I was actually thinking the same, and was remembering how the “child murder” part of *Beloved* remains controversial. How can a human being born to slavery not question the validity of life and living? What other concepts were you attempting to illuminate in this very moving and longer section of the collection? What would you like readers to learn most from hearing these voices?

**SM:** Gosh, I don't know—I can't imagine what it was like to be a slave. I was just trying to tell a version of Margaret Garner's story in a way that didn't seem too false, you know? I'm not sure I was attempting to

illuminate any particular concepts. I mean, I always try to write historical poems so that they speak of the past and to the present, and so I was hoping to say something that would be relevant today. But with those poems in particular, I felt more bound to the past. But the past is always relevant! Maybe it would be more accurate to say that I was trying *not* to say something irrelevant, or trying not to make that history seem irrelevant.

**BR:** Where do you see yourself in the thousands of poets who are alive today? Where do you see your work? I see from your work that you have chosen a very specific path for your work. What do you think about the poetry that is being written today?

**SM:** I am nobody. Among poets, at least, I am nobody. Maybe I'm useful to my students, occasionally, maybe. But most poets are better poets than me, and most deserve to be better known. Hopefully I can occasionally write something that will be of some significance and use to somebody, but I don't hold my breath waiting for that to happen. Often I feel out of step with contemporary poetry, but I love it, I love it so much. It's just that I don't know how to write poems that sound like the poems I read and love. So, you know—I just do my thing over here in the corner, hoping someday I'll be good enough at it to approach the big table and introduce myself to all the folks I've admired from afar. I ain't asking to

stay! I ain't asking for a plate! I just, you know, want to say "Hi."

**BR:** What do you mean by being "out of step with contemporary poetry?" Who are the poets you like to read and love?

**SM:** Oh, I don't know. I just go to readings and hear what (other?) young poets are doing and think, *I have no idea how to do that*. And then sometimes I read, too, and I just, you know, read my straightforward poems about historical events and my feelings. But there are very few poets I *don't* like to read and love. Let's see: in no particular order: Caryl Pagel, Ossian Foley, Emily Pettit, Aracelis Girmay, John Beer, Douglas Kearney, Susan Howe, Jorie Graham, Carmen Giménez Smith, Louise Glück, Evie Shockley, Emily Wilson, Derek Gromadzki, Harvey Hix, Hannah Brooks-Motl, Emily Hunt, Timothy Donnelly, Terrance Hayes, Renee Gladman, Marc Rahe, Jennifer Kronovet, Simone Kearney, Dana Fang, Jena Osman, Kazim Ali, Eduardo Corral and so many others whom I have failed to mention. Also I like a lot of poets who are dead and whom I for some reason didn't list. James Merrill is pretty boss and on my mind a lot lately.

**BR:** I didn't know that one section was about you and your brother. If you hadn't mentioned that in this interview, I wouldn't have known. By the same token,

if you didn't have the notes at the end, I wouldn't necessarily know who these poetics subjects are. Great to hear about Margaret Garner. Does a poem lose anything if not completely understood (by that I mean, within a historical context)? Is it sufficient that the poem is well written without knowing the real story behind it?

**SM:** It's sufficient, yes! Of course! I don't know what it would even *mean* for a poem to be completely understood. I don't think that's possible. When I read, I'm always going for more or less of the gist. That said, I usually think I'm being hella transparent. Most of my fifth book, *All Smiles in Hell*, is a long narrative poem, and is just straight-up a story with a plot and dialogue and all that fictiony stuff, and I tried to write it in a very direct way. And I realized while I was writing it that I've been moving toward directness, toward transparency, for a while now. And sometimes I want to resist that—not because I want to make things difficult for the reader, but because I find a certain amount of obscurity (but it has to be the right amount) can actually help one to understand a poem. If the obscurity is handled in the right way, the reader's mind stretches to reach it. At least mine *tries* to stretch, so I imagine others' minds must try and succeed.

# AFTERWORD

## DISPERSING THE PRESENTS OF HISTORY

— Aby Kaupang

**“To close one’s eyes in the face of inequality and injustice would be absurd. One has a dual role which sometimes converts into just one: that of the writer and of the citizen. The writer who denounces, criticizes, rises up against power, defies the establishment”**

— Sergio Ramírez, Nicaragua, 2015

**I wanted to create a form that would allow the reader to find connections, to work on the relations between these facts in the same way that I was trying to.**

- Jena Osman

I rewrite Osman as I struggle to close this brilliant braid of conversation among Hix, McCrae, Osman, Realuyo and now myself.

This multi-interview format, bookended with an introduction and an afterword, creates a form that requires the reader (me) to find connections, to work on facts in a way that I am now trying to do...that you (dear reader) will now try to do.

Let me offer a little thought—though whether it is connective or tangential, I am not certain. Here there is no predetermined conclusion and perhaps, in fact, I only pass the conversation into your hands.

Each poet expresses a desire, formally and intentionally, to resist the form of empathy that colonizes, to inhabit a form that educates/points towards/illuminates a decontextualized present history or a past history that has been

**In its Greek origins, *historia* meant inquiry, and from Thucydides onwards, the past has been studied to understand its connections with the present.**

—Simon Schama  
elided or erased, and to engage as present activist.

As they query each other as to whether the poem is the proper form for such action, I recall the Nicaraguan poet and activist, Ernesto Cardenal, who coined the term *exteriorism*—to describe a poetic form influenced by Pound’s Imagism, but with a Marxist revolutionary bent. In 1972 Cardenal writes:

Exteriorism is not an -ism or a school. It is as ancient as Homer and biblical poetry (in reality it has constituted the greatest poetry of all time.)... It is created with images of the external world, the world we see and touch... it is objective: narrative and anecdotal, made from elements of real life and concrete things, with proper names and precise details and exact dates and statistics and facts and quotes. In sum, it is *impure* poetry....

Interior poetry, in contrast, is subjective poetry, made only with abstract or symbolic words....

I believe that the only poetry that can express Latin American reality, and reach the people, and be revolutionary, is exterior.

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To be revolutionary. (L.) *Revolvere*, to revolve, re roll and run, turn back, revisit, to change the view and vantage...to consider the axis and the force and the body individually and simultaneously.

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McCrae, Osman and Realuyo are revolutionists. They continuously rotate the questions and the view.

Is it true that history repeats itself? That we haven’t learned? Are our eyes so weary that we’ve disengaged from the turning the human dilemmas over and over again?

What is it to look away? To ignore? To look through the drone? To engage in social media in place of social embodiment? To speak as another character? To speak for another? To consider the axis and the force and the body inter-connectedly? To be disconnected?

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I bring up exteriorism since it seems to be applicable to each writer’s formal process (inclusion of hybridity and multi-writing, pastiche, immediacy, names/dates/ places), as well as to their necessity for engaging social activism to promote change through poetry.

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Cardenal's artifice of objectification is critical to the formation of a "moral position"; the poet insists on politicizing literature to encompass Nicaraguan history and politics. Cardenal opposed what he defined as interiorista language, the language of poetry removed from everyday experience, disengaged from social realities.

**Everything that can be said in a story, or in an essay, or in a novel, can also be said in a poem. In a poem even statistical information, fragments of letters, newspaper editorials, can be included... things that previously were considered elements particular to prose and not to poetry.**

— Cardenal

Osman mentions Joan Retallack's poethics, "the idea that artworks can model a world in which one might like to live." Realuyo states, "Art can be a tool for consciousness-raising.... I want my readers to read, think and hopefully take action to make the world a better place." Cardenal has written that the arts, such as poetry and painting, imagine a utopia that moves humans to revolution against those multifaceted forces that would prevent its existence. Repeatedly this has been proven in Nicaragua and other Central and South American countries. This is happening through the writing of McCrae, Osman and Realuyo.

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It is through poetry, attention to language, attention to forces, that these writers have contextualized themselves in a human tradition of writing and revolution (of being vigilant watchers and turning the camera against the powers that be) that has existed since writing began.

**Poetry is finer and more philosophical than history: for poetry expresses the universal, and history only the particular.**

— Aristotle

H. L. Hix invokes the Aristotle/Plato dilemma in the introduction to this collection. It is troublesome as a binary, but why? Perhaps if we would reframe the terms, it would not be so polarizing. What if the universal is actually Osman's space of openness and incompleteness, of experimentation and ambiguity... what if the particular is McCrae's sense of micro-attunement...rapt attention to the details of animate and inanimate structures, which, when revealed, "help human beings to themselves be more open... and in turn lead to more lovingness"?

## AUTHOR BIOS



Photo Credit: Nancy M. Stuart

**H. L. Hix's** recent poetry collections include *I'm Here to Learn to Dream in Your Language* and *As Much As, If Not More Than*. His other volumes with Essay Press include *The World Over*, *A&Q* and the forthcoming *Uncoverage: Conversations in a New Poetic World*.



**Aby Kaupang**, author of *Little "g" God Grows Tired of Me*, *Absence is Such a Transparent House* and *Scenic Fences | Houses Innumerable*, has had poems appear variously. She is currently acting as Fort Collins Poet Laureate. Kaupang holds master's degrees in both creative writing and occupational therapy from Colorado State University. She lives in Fort Collins with the poet Matthew Cooperman and their two children.



**Shane McCrae** is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *The Animal Too Big to Kill*, and a recipient of a Whiting Writer's Award and a fellowship from the NEA. He teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Spalding University, and at Oberlin College.



**Jena Osman's** books of poems include *Corporate Relations*, *Public Figures*, *The Network* (selected for the National Poetry Series in 2009), *An Essay in Asterisks* and *The Character* (winner of the 1998 Barnard New Women Poets Prize). She is a Professor of English at Temple University, where she teaches in the MFA Creative Writing Program. She founded and edited the literary magazine *Chain* with Juliana Spahr for 12 years. Osman and Spahr now edit the occasional book series *ChainLinks*.



**Bino A. Realuyo** is a poet/novelist/essayist, community organizer and educator. He is the author of the novel *The Umbrella Country* and the poetry collection *The Gods We Worship Live Next Door*, and has edited two anthologies (*The NuyorAsian Anthology: Asian American Writings About New York City* and *The Nuyor Asian Anthology*). His citations include: Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award 2000 finalist, Booklist Top Ten First Novels of 1999, Poetry Society of America's Lucille Medwick Memorial Award and a 2009 Philippine National Book Award for poetry. He attended graduate school at Harvard University with a leadership fellowship from the Kennedy School of Government. He writes regularly for *The Huffington Post* about the Filipino-American experience.



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