



# PSYCHO GEO GRAPHICAL ROMANCE

## THREE INTERVIEWS

curated by Leonard Schwartz



*featuring*  
Yolanda Castaño  
Magdalena Edwards  
Forrest Gander  
Jennifer Scappettone

# Psychogeographical Romance: Three Interviews

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LEONARD SCHWARTZ



#42

## 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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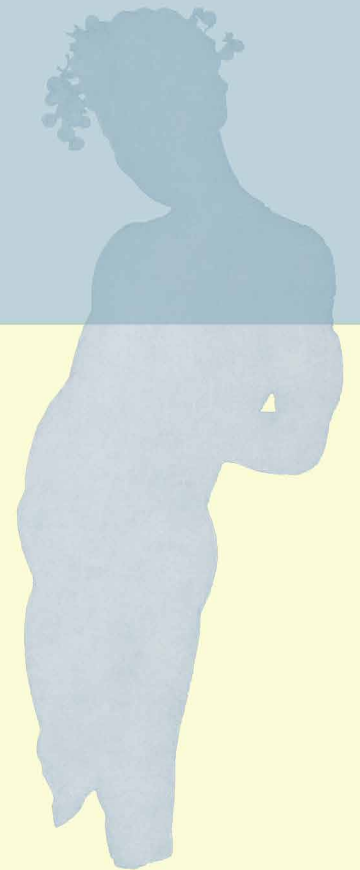
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## CONTENTS

Introduction by Leonard Schwartz	v
Episode #287: Psychogeography of the Disappeared interview with Forrest Gander & Magdalena Edwards	1
Episode #320: Psychogeography of the Highway interview with Yolanda Castaño	19
Episodes #313 & #314: Psychogeography of the Lagoon interview with Jennifer Scappettone	39
Afterword by Magdalena Edwards	71
Author Bios	76



# **INTRODUCTION**

BY LEONARD SCHWARTZ

The sweep of this chapbook is wide but also, I think, directed.

Its three interviews take us from Raúl Zurita (and thus from the epistemological and ontological limits of the nature/culture distinction as realized by that great Chilean poet), as discussed here by poet/translator Forrest Gander and writer/translator Magdalena Edwards, to Galician poet Yolanda Castaño and her poetry of highway and sea (and her argument for Galician as a living language essential to the foundations of Romance-language poetry, an argument for me reminiscent of the one Ezra Pound made for Provençal). Thirdly there is Jennifer Scappettone's magisterial study *Killing The Moonlight: Modernism in Venice*, which demonstrates the ways in which the image of Venice has shaped all of our poetics, and which argues that, in the era of global warming and rising seas, Venice is the image of our future.

This trajectory, then, is one that follows Spanish, Galician, Italian, Venetian and English, as the poets in these languages honor the raptures and hierarchies of poetry itself, all the while seeking out a poetics that reframes or transforms the dire political and

environmental emergencies the mind and body encounter.

The explicitly political horror of the Disappeared under Pinochet's regime in Chile, the language-without-a-nation status of Galician, the decay of a city and the potentiality of environmental catastrophe (but also the necessity to clear away all sentimentality and *doxa*) in the Venice of Scappettone's *Killing The Moonlight*, afford us the chance to dream about a matter Forrest Gander articulates so well in this chapbook's first interview—that of a poetry influenced by a grand lineage (Dante in Zurita's case, Mendhino in Castaño's case, a city's in Scappettone's), yet formally experimental in its imperative, one that speaks from an emotional intensity that breaks into the vernacular consciousness even as it seeks language's limit.

Let's call it a poetry that honors Pound's "make it new," and then makes it new, without any hectoring. That honors Valéry's "language within the language," yet can be perceived by a public that might respond to the work with transformative glimmers of recognition.

This trajectory is one that, first spoken on radio broadcasts, sees a place for a complex poetry in a complex world of action. Deep desire itself has agency.

# PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF THE DISAPPEARED



## EPISODE #287

INTERVIEW WITH MAGDALENA EDWARDS  
& FORREST GANDER

**Leonard Schwartz:** Today's guests, on the phone from a kitchen someplace in California, include Forrest Gander. He's a poet. Recent books include the novel *The Trace* and a book of poems, *Core Samples from the World*, as well as *Eiko & Koma*. He's a translator from the Spanish, has translated numerous Mexican poets. We've discussed his translations of the Bolivian poet Jaime Saenz in the past. Welcome, Forrest Gander.

**Forrest Gander:** Thank you, Leonard.

**LS:** Great to have you back. We also have on the show today Magdalena Edwards. She's a co-editor at the *Los Angeles Review of Books's* new project "Around the World," which is devoted to international art, and I hope to be able to talk with Magdalena about that project a little later on. Welcome, Magdalena Edwards.

**Magdalena Edwards:** Thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here.

**LS:** It's great to have you both on the phone. I contacted you, Forrest, recently because I wanted

to talk with you about the great Chilean poet, Raul Zurita. You've written about Zurita. You published a review of the new translation of Zurita's *Purgatory*, entitled "Out of Delirium." It's available at *Jacket2* online. And Magdalena Edwards, you're Chilean by birth, by background, and have also written on Raul Zurita, including pieces in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *The Millions*, so it's really great that I'm able to catch the two of you in the same kitchen at the same time. Forrest, could you start us off by telling us a little bit about who Raul Zurita is and why his book *Purgatory* and his writing in general is so extraordinary?

**FG:** Yeah, I think I can. In the recent history of poetry in Chile, there have been enormous twentieth-century literary figures including, of course, Neruda with his sensual technicolor lyricism. Neruda was so influential that there was almost nothing to do after him except imitate him, badly, until Nicanor Parra invented the anti-poem using vernacular, science and street language. And then younger poets were imitating Parra until, during a time of social and political upheaval, when Pinochet came to power during a coup and thousands were tortured and imprisoned, writers looked for another way to respond to their moment. Zurita was part of a political performance group that engaged in radical theatrical interventions in Santiago. He was a father of young children, and the situation was gruesome

and violent. People were trying to live their daily lives, but their friends were disappearing and it made everyone insane. This is what's going on as Zurita comes to be a writer: in a way he was burdened with his subject material—he didn't choose it, and it's remained his subject matter ever since. He writes about violence and the transcendence of that violence through love. And the amazing part of his writing, for me, is that, despite that he's influenced by Dante (even linguistically, since his grandmother was Italian), his work is formally quite avant-garde. He's interested in the long poem, in series, and in radical but expressive formal devices, and he writes with an emotional intensity that anyone can access. That's what makes his work so powerful. There are some wonderful translations now into English by Anna Deeny, Daniel Borzutzky, and...

**LS:** Absolutely. Also William Rowe's translation of...

**FG:** *INRI* by Rowe. That's right.

**ME:** And Jack Schmitt's translation of *Anteparadise*.

**FG:** And Jack Schmitt, who also translated Neruda, and who Zurita really trusted.

**LS:** Forrest, I certainly appreciate what you say. Zurita is the poet of, or from even, the disappeared. All the bodies, all the people along the Chilean left that



were dropped into the ocean or into the volcano mouth, the mouths of volcanoes, or into the desert, on the grounds that they would be disappeared without documentation. Zurita writes from those voices as if the ocean or the volcanoes or the desert had a voice or had voices, and these voices were being channeled through Zurita so that the Pinochet regime could not get away with the atrocities—or that's my sense of it. Could you speak a little bit, Magdalena Edwards, to your sense of what Zurita's avant-garde and orphic aspects might be?

**ME:** Yes, absolutely. Zurita writes with this incredible urgency, and I think that one thing that is so interesting about him, in addition to everything Forrest has said, is that when he started writing and being published (his first poems were published in 1975), this was a time of a lot of censorship in Chile. Really not a lot of poetry or a lot of writing was being published at all. His first book came out in 1979, *Purgatory*, and this book was written by this young man, this engineering student, writing these new, experimental forms, that were very in a way abstract and at the same time very mathematical, kind of searching for a language to speak about the unspeakable. Meanwhile the most important literary critic, sort of *the* literary critic of the time, and who is still very important in Chile today, Ignacio Valente, who's also a priest of the Opus Dei, praised this book and said: you know, this book and this poet—this

poet and this book are extraordinary, and are very important and we all need to read it and this is why, and he gave his particular reading on the book. You can imagine the positioning of that, and one of the beautiful and powerful things about this book is it can be read in many different ways, and it can be praised by Chile's number one literary critic, who also happens to be an ultra-conservative priest, while containing the most sort of intrinsically subversive message for the people to seek a new language with which to speak out. So there begins this amazing poetic arc, and today Zurita is publishing just as urgent a type of poetry, some his own, some translations, some as an editor curating the work of others. He's a university professor, and some of his current and former students are involved in political protests, and he's also won all of the most important literary prizes. He's able to maintain these multiple stances. I think that gives him a further breadth and credibility. It's just so interesting that he came from an avant-garde performance-art political group that was really pushing against the Pinochet regime and so forth, and now he is part of the establishment without losing any of that past provocation. He continues to provoke. And his inflections with Dante are so critical and he's now actually translating Dante into Spanish. He's maintaining the *terza rima*, and it's so beautiful and so evocative, and I spoke with him in person last December when I was in Chile, and I asked him about his work and about poetry and he

said, "Well, I've written everything I have to write. I'm not going to write any more poetry." I don't know if I believe that, but that's what he said. "Translation is what's keeping me afloat. I wake up in the morning and translate Dante, and this is the work I have to do." So I just find him so exciting, and the more I read, the more powerful his writing is.

**LS:** Magdalena, I share that excitement, and when I heard him read a couple years back at Poet's House in New York, there was this palpable kind of presence by way of the poetry, by way of the language of the poetry, and his performance of it felt like meeting Paul Celan or somebody like that, in terms of a poet that carries that kind of weight, that kind of heft. So I've opened up *Purgatory*, translated by Anna Deeny, to a passage that reads as follows: ["Look at that, the desert of Atacama, it's nothing but stains Did you know? Of course but how hard would it have been to take a look at yourself and say Christ come on I just too am full of stains. Listen pretty boy, have you seen your own sins? Good, but then allow him to better lift himself through those skies stained like in your dreams. Like mirages and auras, the inri is my mind, the desert of Chile."] That from Raul Zurita's *Purgatory*, translated by Anna Deeny. Maybe that passage picks up on Dante, because it is from *Purgatory*, and certainly with the Catholic myth and vocabulary and ritual rhetoric in the work. It also picks up something that I think is really important and that

is the Atacama, the driest place in the world, the desert where Zurita was interred in a concentration camp during the first years of the Pinochet regime. Anything you can say, Magdalena or Forrest, about the relationship between poetry and geology, or psychogeography, in Zurita's writing?

**FG:** Yeah, I think we both can. That word "stain" is a really significant word throughout that book, and it's really hard to translate the word from Spanish into one word in English. In Spanish it's *mancha*, stain, smudge, spot, the marks on a dappled cow, etc. But Zurita's sense (long before there was something called eco-poetics in an international sense) that landscape and subjectivity are integrated derives from the fact that so many Chileans were hacked to pieces, and their flesh and their blood was strewn across the deserts and the volcanoes and the seas around Chile. Mass grave sites were blown up so that there would be no traces of the dead. So the landscape itself is stained by the human. That's one of the fascinating things about the way Zurita writes about Chile—its landscape and its people are constantly merging in a horrific and yet holy communion through his poems. The brilliant poet-critic-editor Edmundo Garrido is writing a book about landscape in Zurita's work.

**LS:** Thank you, Forrest. Anything, Magdalena?

**ME:** Sure. I mean he's constantly writing in different ways about God and about the creator, and he also has a book called *INRI* that was published a little bit later. In a way he's kind of, I think, rewriting his first book, which was part of a trilogy that echoes Dante (purgatory, paradise and the new life). He's kind of constantly rewriting that work, because it has to be rewritten; it has to be resaid; it has to be tried out in different ways, in different words. It's not enough. It's almost like a mantra or prayer in a way, but also very secular and very inclusive. I don't know if I'm making any sense, but this idea of the landscape, it's so important, and his interventions into the landscape and the physical body of Chile come from the very beginning. And in his book *Purgatory* there's a photograph of his face which he burned, and he writes about it in that book. In the first lines he says "My friends think / I'm a sick woman / because I burned my cheek." So in a way he has made these physical interventions into his own body (his cheek) and also into the desert of Atacama—where he had a phrase written (*Ni Pena Ni Miedo*: Neither Shame Nor Fear), which you can see if you Google him. You go to Google Maps and see a satellite image of this phrase written in the Atacama Desert. And it's still there, because they say that the children that live in that small town go every day and push up the sand so the words can still be visible. It's really all very interesting how his poetry extends beyond the page, and the physicality of it, and I would also say

the spirituality of that physicality, that sacred body which is human, which is nature, which is God all fused together.

**LS:** That's extraordinary, Magdalena, as you evoke it, and there was a moment of course, a famous moment when Zurita demonstrated the Christian principle of turning the other cheek—he did burn his own cheek with a hot iron to demonstrate to his torturers that he could do something worse. So that burning cheek is a powerful image, but it's also the burning topography of the Atacama and, as you say, a transformation of landscape into flesh that is so powerful. And you know, there's a Chilean filmmaker Guzmán who made a film *Nostalgia for the Light* that's about the Atacama Desert. I think he used the phrase that the Atacama's a "portal into other worlds," because every country that's anything in astronomy has a planetarium there. It's the best place on Earth to look at the stars because it's totally dry. There's no precipitation there, no clouds, nothing to get in the way. So it's literally a portal into the universe from the point of view of astronomers. You sense it functions that way for Zurita poetically too, don't you?

**FG:** Well, it's like the blank page. It seems to be, at first, an empty place. Poetry begins from nothing. From whatever has come before. To stand in the

Atacama Desert is to experience an incomparable humility before a landscape that has no use for you.

**LS:** The books are, as we've mentioned, *Purgatory* by University of California Press and translated by Anna Deeny, and *INRI*, published by Marick Press and translated by William Rowe. You know, Magdalena, I would be remiss if I had you on the phone and didn't get a chance to ask you about something not immediately related to Zurita, but Zurita is certainly a part of it, as a major figure in international poetry and poetics. But the question I wanted to ask you about is your *Los Angeles Review of Books* project "Around the World." Could you tell us a little bit about what that is and what you're doing with it?

**ME:** Yes, absolutely, my pleasure. "Around the World" is a new publication at the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and I'm co-editor with Jonathan Hahn. We're incredibly excited to be publishing articles that are international in scope, written by writers and scholars and journalists who are living and working all "around the world." And we're very excited to be publishing pieces bilingually whenever possible. For example, one of our early pieces is by a Chilean journalist named Óscar Contardo, and he has written several books and just published an anthology he edited called *17 Again*, and it features writers who grew up during the dictatorship, and so he wrote a piece for us talking a little bit about that project,

and talking about the dictatorship and the 40-year anniversary of the coup in Chile. He wrote that in Spanish and so we translated it into English and published it bilingually. Then we have other pieces that sometimes are written bilingually. For example we have a fantastic essay by Paulo Henriques Britto, who's a Brazilian poet and scholar and translator. He's based in Rio, and he wrote this amazing essay on the Brazilian poetry scene. He wrote that piece in English and Portuguese, so that can be read bilingually as well. That's something we're really excited to see in this section.

**LS:** Sounds terrific. And "Around the World" is an online publication, is that right?

**ME:** Well, yes. The *Los Angeles Review of Books* is online, and you can read it by going to [lareviewofbooks.org](http://lareviewofbooks.org), and we publish new pieces every day, usually two or three pieces, and we also have the *LARB Quarterly Journal*. Our second issue is coming out this winter, and that includes new writing by scholars and journalists and literary writers—it's a venue that brings many kinds of voices, styles and genres together. We also have a new print quarterly that's called *The Los Angeles Review of Books Magazine*, and that's kind of curated selections that have come out online, now in a print format. And that's what we send to our members. We're a nonprofit, and we exist through our subscribers, our

members, and people who decide they're excited about the work we're doing and that they want to support us.

**LS:** I'm interested in the idea of the bilingual or multilingual even though this is a radio program. For example, when I've called Raul Zurita in Chile, he's read in the Spanish and I've read the translations in English. I think it's important for an audience, for Americans, to hear and read even without knowledge of the other language, just to be present, just to have the other language present in our discourses and next to our discourses and so on. So really terrific to have this work you're doing, Magdalena. Forrest, were you about to say something there?

**FG:** Oh, I was just getting excited about the terrific projects at LARB that Magdalena is doing. Also I want to mention something Zurita just finished, a bilingual anthology called *Pinholes in the Night: Essential Poems from Latin America*. A number of the poems he includes are excerpted from book-length works. He put it together in the hospital, when he wasn't sure that he would survive a series of surgeries and complications. He picked 18 Latin-American poems, the 18 poems he argues changed the course of Latin-American literature, and without which Latin-American poetry would be something entirely different. The translations are by some of the best Latin American translators-writers in the U.S.

It's an amazing book. Copper Canyon published it in conjunction with The Poetry Foundation.

**LS:** That's great to know about. *Pinholes in the Night* puts us right back in that planetarium in the Atacama looking up. It's really great that Copper Canyon here in Washington State is doing that. Forrest, that's really exciting. Can you say a little bit about what you're up to these days? I mean you're such a terrific poet and such a modest guy: when I want you to come on the show to read from your own books somehow you're always busy, but when I proposed something about Zurita you were up for it right away. Maybe I can trick you into reading whatever's on hand?

[Laughing]

**FG:** Well, there's some Zurita on hand. Would you like to hear a bilingual poem by Zurita with Magdalena reading the Spanish?

**LS:** That would be great, and it also demonstrates my theory about Forrest Gander reading his own work, so that would be great.

[Laughing]

**FG:** OK, so this is Anna Deeny's translation of *Purgatory*: "my friends think / I'm a sick woman / because I burned my cheek"

**ME:** "mis amigos creen que / estoy muy mala porque / quemé mi mejilla"

**FG:** "I awake / A column has broken // I'm a sainted woman I say"

**ME:** "Me amanezco / Se ha roto una columna // Soy una santa digo"

**FG:** "All made-up face against the glass / I called myself this enlightened woman tell me it's not so / the Super Star of Chile / I touched myself in the shadows I kissed my legs // I've hated myself so much these years"

**ME:** "Todo maquillado contra los vidrios / me llamé esta iluminada dime que no / el Súper Estrella de Chile / me toque en la penumbra besé mis piernas // Me he aborrecido tanto estos años"

**FG:** What you see is an inseparable attraction/repulsion in even just the beginning of this poem *Purgatory*.

**LS:** Yeah, it's terrific. Later there's the image: "They've shaved my head / they've dressed me in these gray

wool rags / —Mom keeps on smoking / I am Joan of Arc" Or: "They catalog me on microfilm." Though both the hardness and grandeur of the language in Zurita is extraordinary. Magdalena and Forrest, we're a little up against it in terms of time, but it's really been wonderful catching up with both of you and having a chance to speak with you about Zurita. I happen to have known about a reading he gave in Hong Kong just recently, and there was this misunderstanding: there was this blog discussion that I know about through my wife, who's Chinese, that this was magical realism, and of course it's not magical realism—it's all-too-real at some level, right? So it's really an interesting discourse about how the work is received sometimes, and what is actually vernacular and present in the work, and I think you've done a great service and a great job in terms of making Zurita's work present to us today. Thank you so much.

**FG:** Thanks Leonard for always paying attention.

**LS:** I appreciate that Forrest, and Magdalena, really wonderful to get to know you a little bit through this broadcast and to know about the *Los Angeles Review of Books*' "Around the World." Thanks for all the work you're doing there.

**ME:** Thank you for having me. It's been lovely.

# PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF THE HIGHWAY

A silhouette of a person standing on a dog, looking up. The person is wearing a tank top and shorts, and the dog is on all fours. The background is split into a light blue upper half and a light yellow lower half.

## EPISODE #320

INTERVIEW WITH YOLANDA CASTAÑO

**Leonard Schwartz:** Today's guest on the phone from Spain, I should say from Galicia, is the poet Yolanda Castaño. She's the author of six books of poetry. She's worked in radio and television. She writes in Galician and is an advocate and spokesperson for that extraordinary language. I met her recently at a poetry festival in Beijing, and I'm really happy to be speaking with her again today or tonight. Welcome, Yolanda Castaño.

**Yolanda Castaño:** Thank you very much. How are you?

**Leonard Schwartz:** I'm fine. It's great to hear your voice and to be in conversation again.

**YC:** And here we are now.

**LS:** Here we are. And so I'm looking at this poem of yours that's been translated—I believe it's from an earlier book called *Depth of Field*, and I thought it might be a great idea to read this poem together as a way to begin to hear your language and your voice, and then to maybe talk about both of those things, both your language and your voice.



**YC:** It's going to be a pleasure to make the sounds of my own language, as opposed to any other.

**LS:** *[Laughing]*. Well I'll try and maximize the pleasure and minimize the horror of the others. I'll try my best. Though shall we read "Highway to Hell" or "Highway to Heaven"?

**YC:** "Highway to Heaven" is better.

**LS:** Much better.

**YC:** "Highway to Heaven": "Na autoestrada quedan marcas de curvas imposibles, / liñas vacilantes que acaban directas contra a mediana. // Cómo quedaría a miña beleza de espiga / tronzada e sangrante contra o cristal do parabrisas, / e cá! sería o estado exacto dos meus peitos / que xa non caerían/ nunca máis?"

**LS:** "Scars of impossible curves remain upon the highway, / flickering lines that end up straight against the border. // What would my spike beauty look like / whilst being smashed and bloody against the windshield glass, / and what would the true condition of my breasts be, / for they would never ever / fall / again?"

**YC:** "Cápsula de só. // Entre isto / e nada / un minúsculo movemento. / Un descoido, unha parva

regandixa de azar e o / sonrosado peso dos meus / ósos contra a / cuneta. // Unha volvoreta de frío atravesa o paso, / os meus ollos quedan prendidos do seu salto e / teño sorte. // Un dous, un dous, un / dous."

**LS:** "Capsule of just. // Between this / and nothing / a worthless movement. / A moment's inattention. A foolish crack of chance and the / rosy weight of my / bones against the / ditch. // A butterfly of cold crosses the way through, / my eyes get caught up by its leap and / I am lucky. // One two, one two, one / two."

**YC:** "Se neste preciso intre / cruzase polo meu carril o máis ínfimo malfado / e a miña moza fortuna saltase polos aires, / ninguén vería nada de / turbio ou sospeitoso / na rutilante beleza / do meu cadaver sobre o arcén."

**LS:** "If at this very moment in time / my lane were crossed by the least misfortune / and my young luck just blew up at once, / no one would see anything / shady or suspicious / in the glittering beauty / of my corpse upon the edge."

**YC:** "A autoestrada de noite parece un videoxogo. / O negror máis opaco non me traba. // Coma unha intermitencia, / a miña xuventude unha liña de cocaína que ás veces / se torce. // Detrás da miña

órbita excítanse os volantes. // E acelero tan rápido  
/ como a este verso se lle vai a vida.”

**LS:** “At night the highway resembles a video game.  
/ The dulllest blackness does not confuse me. // *Like  
an intermittence* / my youth, a cocaine line that  
sometimes / bends. // Behind my orbit the wheels  
get excited. / And I speed up as fast / as life is  
leaving this verse.”

You’ve been listening to the poetry of Yolanda Castaño, translated by Susana Castro. The book is entitled *Depth of Field*, published bilingually in 2009. Yolanda, thank you so much for that reading of the poem. Just on the cult of death (that’s not really the right phrase, but on the proximity of death at any quotidian moment, particularly driving down the highway), the poem is really...well “Highway to Heaven” not “Highway to Hell,” so it’s kind of a celebration of possibility of being in a liminal space, isn’t it?

**YC:** Well, I think there’s talk about identity, but also representation of that identity and the problematics of that representation of self-identity. So of course luck and destiny, but also in between lines there’s that kind of thinking.

**LS:** Absolutely. Now the second point I wanted to make quickly is that the poem is not written in

Spanish. The poem is written in Galician, which is your language, and I wondered if you could say a little bit about that language and its qualities and the politics of it in relation to Spanish. Of course Spain has four national languages: Spanish, Basque, Catalan and Galician.

**YC:** Exactly, so I was reading now in Galician, the language I write in, and this is one of the four official languages in Spain. Our language is as old and ancient as Spanish is, and it’s a proper language—not a dialect, but a proper language with our very own literature. It’s a very old language coming from the Middle Ages. Actually in the Middle Ages it had a wonderful moment (we call it kind of a golden age) when many troubadours were writing and singing in Galician, as Occitans did in the South of France. At that moment Galician, or now sometimes it’s called Galician-Portuguese, was a very prestigious language for lyrics. It was the same language as the Portuguese at that time, then we separated for political reasons. We went under the Kingdom of Spain and the Spanish king and queen, and they built their own state in the south. Now we have a stateless language, but a very rich language that had known this period of wonderful quality for literature and especially poetry. It’s true that the Catholic kings were a little bit against minority languages of Spain, but then, in Galicia, we had a period of so-called renaissance in the nineteenth century. Later,

during the dictatorship, as you can imagine, these minority languages were prohibited as well, so after democracy arrived we gained better status.

**LS:** Really intriguing. You know, I was struck when we met in Beijing at that poetry festival that there was a Chinese poet from Macau, a former Portuguese colony, who spoke Portuguese, and although Portuguese and Galician are not the same language, nonetheless you could communicate across them. So you've located Galician between Spanish and Portuguese, as a kind of repository of both (though I may have that wrong) in the medieval lyric songs, but as a language that is closer to Portuguese in many ways than it is to Spanish. Is that correct?

**YC:** Yeah. We share the same roots, the same grammar. Since we received the strong influence from the Spanish state and the Spanish language, of course our pronunciation is much closer to Spanish. We also have some differences with Portuguese in the orthography. But for the rest you can perfectly notice the same language, the same roots, and for that reason we can perfectly communicate with people from Brazil and the Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, and Macau of course.

**LS:** We had discussed reading one of those medieval lyric songs in Galician before coming back to your

own poems. It's by the poet, the troubadour, Mendhino, if I'm pronouncing that correctly.

**YC:** Yes, Mendhino. For many people at that time, like I said, this was the prestigious language for lyrics. Even Alfonso X, the Wise King, when he wrote his famous poetry, he used Galician, even though he was not a Galician man. But that was the prestigious language for lyrics so he used it as well. And also Mendhino, one of the most famous troubadours from the thirteenth century.

**LS:** Fantastic. Can we hear the medieval Galician and I'll follow with the English translations by Jonathan Dunne?

**YC:** Of course. "Sediame eu na ermida de San Simon / e cercaronmi as ondas, que grandes son; / jeu atendendo o meu amigo, / eu atendendo o meu amigo! // Estando na ermida ante o altar, / e cercaronmi as ondas grandes do mar; / jeu atendendo o meu amigo, / eu atendendo o meu amigo! // E cercaronmi as ondas, que grandes son; / non hei barqueiro nen remador; / jeu atendendo o meu amigo, / eu atendendo o meu amigo! // E cercaronmi as ondas do alto mar; / non hei barqueiro nen sei remar; / jeu atendendo o meu amigo, / eu atendendo o meu amigo! // Non hei barqueiro nen remador, / Morrerei fremosa no mar maior; / jeu atendendo o meu amigo, / eu atendendo o meu

amigo! // Non hei barqueiro nen sei remar; / morrerei  
fremosa no alto mar; / jeu atendendo o meu amigo,  
/ eu atendendo o meu amigo!"

**LS:** "I sat in the chapel on the isle of San Simón, /  
and waves came all around me how very big they are:  
/ waiting for my lover, / waiting for my lover. // I sat  
in the chapel at the table of the Lord, / and the big  
waves of the sea came all around me there: / waiting  
for my lover, / waiting for my lover. // The waves  
came all around me, how very big they are; / I have  
no boatmen with me nor anyone to row: / waiting  
for my lover, / waiting for my lover. // And the waves  
of the tall sea came all around me there; / I have  
no boatman there with me and I don't know how  
to row: / waiting for my lover, / waiting for my lover.  
// I have no boatman with me, nor anyone to row; /  
all beautiful I'm going to die in that massive sea: /  
waiting for my lover, / waiting for my lover. // I have  
no boatman with me, and I don't know how to row;  
/ all beautiful I'm going to die in that tall, tall sea: /  
waiting for my lover, / waiting for my lover." That  
was Jonathan Dunne's translation of a medieval lyric  
Galician song by the troubadour Mendhino, read by  
Yolanda Castaño. Thank you very much.

**YC:** You can perfectly notice that there's a song with  
a chorus and everything. This belongs to a kind of  
subgenre—songs of "friends," though much more  
than a friend...as you can guess.

**LS:** Yes.

**YC:** Love songs, friend songs and satirical songs (of  
insult and mockery) mostly these three subgenres.

**LS:** Certainly reading Mendhino's poem right after  
your "Highway to Heaven" poem, I sort of heard  
something of this in your "Highway to Heaven." It's  
the ocean and the sea that looms in its tallness and  
that brings not love but death in the troubadour  
song. And in your poem it's the highway, which is  
kind of like the possibility of an ocean, and it's a very  
tall event and there's something again about that  
liminal state between life and death that seems to, at  
least looking in from the outside, seems to run from  
Mendhino to yourself.

**YC:** Wow, I never noticed, but I have to admit that's  
a little bit true.

**LS:** I think it's there, particularly in those two poems.

**YC:** I'm impressed because I never noticed any of  
that.

**LS:** To go from the boats to the highway, or from the  
ocean to the vast waves of traffic.

**YC:** It's true that for Galicians the sea has been an  
important resource of course. Because we are on

the northwest coast of Spain, and many people make a living through the sea in many ways, through sailing or whatever. We are a very migrant people as well. We have crossed the Atlantic many times (which is now between us times two, my friend), and especially to New York and all the places in Latin America. Actually, in Argentina they call every kind of Spaniard "Galician" because they were most prevalent in the region.

**LS:** Interesting. I didn't know that. Yolanda, I thought we'd read another one of your poems. It's called "A Story of Transformation," from your book *A Coruña in light of the letters*.

**YC:** Yes, it's like a single poem that I used for this collected book, and for some other publications like magazines and things like that. It's also in *Depth of Field*.

**LS:** OK, so it's in *Depth of Field* as well, so we're within the same book.

**YC:** OK, I'll read it.

**LS:** OK.

**YC:** "Foi primeiro un trastorno / unha lesiva abstinencia de nena eramos pobres e non tiña nin aquilo / raquítica de min depauperada antes de eu amargor

carente unha / parábola de complexos unha síndrome unha pantasma / (Aciago a partes iguais botalo en falla ou lamentalo) / Arrecife de sombra que rompe os meus colares. / Foi primeiro unha branquia evasiva que / non me quixo facer feliz tocándome co seu sopro / son a cara máis común do patio do colexio / a faciana eslamiada que nada en nada sementa / telo ou non o tes renuncia afaite traga iso / corvos toldando nubes unha condena de frío eterno / unha paciente galerna unha privada privación / (nena de colexio de monxas que fun saen todas / anoréxicas ou lesbianas a / letra entra con sangue nos cóbados nas cabezas nas / conciencias ou nas conas). / Pechei os ollos e desexei con todas as miñas forzas / lograr dunha vez por todas converterme na que era. // Pero a beleza corrompe. A beleza corrompe. / Arrecife de sombra que gasta os meus colares. / Vence a madrugada e a gorxa contén un presaxio. / Pobre parviña!, obsesionácheste con cubrir con aspas en vez de/ co seu contido. / Foi un lento e vertixinoso agromar de flores en inverno / Os ríos saltaban cara atrás e resolvíanse en fervenzas rosas / borboletas e caracois nacéronme nos cabelos / O sorriso dos meus peitos deu combustible aos aeroplanos / A beleza corrompe / A beleza corrompe / A tersura do meu ventre escoltaba á primavera / desbordaron as buguinas nas miñas mans tan miúdas / o meu afago máis alto beliscou o meu ventrículo / e xa non souben qué facer con tanta luz en tanta sombra. // Dixéronme: "a túa propia arma será o teu propio

castigo" / cuspíronme na cara as miñas propias  
virtudes neste / club non admiten a rapazas cos  
beizos pintados de vermello / un maremoto sucio  
unha usura de perversión que / non pode ter que ver  
coa miña máscara de pestanas os/ ratos subiron ao  
meu cuarto enluxeiron os caixóns da roupa branca /  
litros de ferralla alcatrán axexo ás agachadas litros /  
de control litros de difamadores quilos de suspicacias  
levantadas / só coa tensión do arco das miñas cellas  
deberían maniatarte / adxudicarte unha estampa  
gris e borrar os trazos con ácido / ¿renunciar a  
ser eu para ser unha escritora? / demonizaron o  
esguío e lanzal do meu pescozo e o / xeito en que  
me nace o cabelo na parte baixa da caluga neste  
/ club non admiten a rapazas tan ben adobiadas /  
Desconfiamos do estío / A beleza corrompe. / Mira  
ben se che compensa todo isto."

**LS:** Here's the translation: "First it was a disorder  
/ a girl's harmful abstinence we were poor I had  
nothing / except rickets poverty before I bitterness  
lacking a / parabola of complexes a syndrome  
a ghost / (Equally ill-fated to miss or lament it) /  
Shadowy reef which breaks my necklaces. / First of  
all it was an evasive gill which / wouldn't make me  
happy touching me with its breath / I'm the plainest  
face in the school playground / insipid expression  
which sows nothing anywhere / have it or not give  
up get used to swallow it / crows covering clouds  
sentenced to eternal cold / a patient gale a private

deprivation / (I was a convent girl they all end up  
/ anorexic lesbian spare / the rod spoil the elbows  
heads / cunts and consciences). / I closed my eyes  
and violently wished / once and for all to become  
what I was. // But beauty corrupts. Beauty corrupts.  
/ Shadowy reef which wears out my necklaces. /  
Morning conquers and the throat contains a portent.  
/ Silly little thing! you were obsessed with covering  
with crosses / instead of content. / It was a slow dizzy  
blossoming of flowers in winter / The rivers jumped  
back turned into waterfalls roses / butterflies and  
snails appeared in my hair / The smile of my breasts  
added fuel to airplanes / Beauty corrupts / Beauty  
corrupts / The tightness of my stomach escorted  
spring / conch shells overflowed in my miniature  
hands / my highest compliment pinched my ventricle  
/ I no longer knew what to do with so much light in so  
much shade. // They said your weapon will be your  
own punishment / they threw my virtues in my face  
this / club does not admit girls with red painted lips  
/ a dirty seaquake perverted usury which / can have  
nothing to do with my mask of lashes / mice went up  
to my room fouled the drawers of underwear / liters  
of scrap tar secret spying liters / of control liters of  
slanders kilos of suspicions raised / with only the  
tense arch of my eyebrows you should be tied up /  
given a grey appearance your features erased with  
acid / to stop being me in order to become a writer?  
/ they demonized my long thin neck the way / I have  
hair at the base of my nape this / club does not admit

such well turned out girls / We distrust the summer  
/ Beauty corrupts. / Think hard if this is all worth it."

Thank you so much, Yolanda, for the reading of that poem. Anything you could say, or want to say, about this poem?

**YC:** Well again, since it's belonging to the same collection, *Depth of Field*, it's again dealing with the representation of identity, of the self, all these problematics, especially from the female point of view. I think there is a gender mark in the poem.

**LS:** Absolutely. There is in the troubadour poem as well. I think it's written from the point of view of a female voice, although the poet may be male.

**YC:** Yeah, of these three subgenres I mentioned (love songs, friend songs and songs of derision), only the friend songs, or songs of friends, are always in the female voice, even when they were, we think, written by male authors. But they were always in the female voice, longing for their lovers or something like that.

**LS:** I see.

**YC:** There is a very strong female presence in Galician literature. I have to say that actually the main figure of Galician literature happens to be a woman poet from the nineteenth century, Rosalía

de Castro. This is our main figure, as Cervantes is for Spanish literature. She was amazing. She was a Romantic poet from the nineteenth century, but of course very famous all over Spain and studied by students of Spanish literature even when she was writing mainly in Galician.

**LS:** Really interesting to think about that back and forth, that dialogue. Yolanda, can we read one more poem? I have here "I Passed by Here So Many Times and Never Saw You Before." Perhaps this time I'll read the English first, and then we can listen in on the Galician with some sense of denotative meaning. Here is "I Passed by Here So Many Times and Never Saw You Before": "We are making a detailed inventory, / like the herbarium of an unforeseeable constellation. / First are the lilies, adornment of splattered stars; / the dahlias and the chrysanthemums; / the poppies need to be included because those tiny, shy flowers also deserve it. / The fig tree's flower is subliminal. / The most bookish of all: the capitula of the inflorescences. / The orchid is clearly a lascivious flower, / it too closely resembles—I shan't go there. / The hibiscus fills the afternoon with whims and proverbs. / Hydrangeas: tell me how happy I was here. / There are the iris, the lavender, what is called the tea rose. / And then there is the magnolia that, as its name indicates, / must once have been the emblem of some kind of Mongol sovereignty. / Callas, anemones, the rhododendron's

hardened indication. / Then there are other prodigies findable in distant latitudes, / like the unspeakable chilamate flower, / that is felt but not seen, like / that deep love that rises like a bellow from the knees. / There are / water lilies, Chinese roses, dandelions. / We also have cosmos and sage and impatiens but those are already / more conceptual flowers. / The passion-flower is like the throne of an answer, the / canopy of a consideration. / There are flowers that forever bear the name of the first eye that saw them. / Lilacs, marigolds, carnations. / I cannot forget the mimosas, swarm of tiny warnings, / nor my most spoiled: the indecent scent of the bougainvilleas. // But, I already told you—I don't know, it's strange, / I've passed by here so many times and... / no, / I never saw you / before."

**YC:** "Pasei tantas veces por aquí... e nunca vos vira. // Estamos a facer un inventario minucioso, / coma o herbario dunha constelación impredecible. / Están primeiro os lirios, adobío de estrelas precipitadas, / as dalias e os crisantemos, / hai que contar as papoulas porque tamén o merecen as / flores tímidas e miúdas. / A da figueira é unha flor subliminar. / As máis librescas de todas, as inflorescencias en capítulo. / A orquídea é claramente unha flor sicalíptica, / imítase de máis, non sigo por aí. / O hibisco enche de antollos e proverbios a tarde. / Hortensias: contádeme canto de feliz fun aquí. / Están os iris, a lavanda, a chamada rosa de té. / E logo está a

magnolia que, como o seu nome indica, / en tempos debeu de dar emblema a algún tipo de soberanía mongol. / Calas, anémonas, o aguerrido síntoma do rododendro. / Despois están outros prodixios rexistrables en latitudes afastadas, / como a indíctil flor do chilamate / que se sente pero non se ve, coma / ese fondo amor que sobe coma un bramido dende os xeonllos. / Hai / ambroíños de río, rosas chinesas, dentes de león. / Temos tamén cosmos e azar e pensamentos pero esas son xa/ flores máis conceptuais. / A pasiflora é coma o trono dunha resposta, o / baldaquino dunha consideración. / Hai flores que levan para sempre o nome do primeiro ollo que as viu. / Lilas, caléndulas, caraveliñas. / Non podo esquecer as mimosas, enxame de diminutas advertencias, / nin as miñas absolutas consentidas: fragor indecente das buganvíleas. // Pero, xa vos dicía, non sei, é curioso, / pasei tantas veces por aquí e... / non, / non vos vira / nunca."

**LS:** It's really interesting to see that, when we were in China together, you were always the Spanish poet, but you weren't, and you kept insisting that you were the Galician poet, and all I can say is that it was a great thing to go to Beijing and learn about Galician, and get to know your work. You know, we're up against it in terms of time. We'll have to do this more often, Yolanda. Let me say for now: thank you so much for staying up fairly late in Spain, not too late, but fairly late. It's been a real pleasure.



**YC:** It's an honor for me and for my own language.

**LS:** Thank you. The honor was ours.

# PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY OF THE LAGOON

A dark silhouette of a person standing with their arms raised in a 'V' shape. The person is facing away from the viewer. The background is a solid light yellow.

**EPISODE #313  
& EPISODE #314**

INTERVIEW WITH JENNIFER SCAPPETONE

## [ PART 1 ]

**Leonard Schwartz:** I'm very happy to say I have on the phone, from somewhere in southern California, the writer and poet Jennifer Scappettone. She's an associate professor of English, creative writing, and Romance languages and literatures at the University of Chicago, and was the Andrew W. Mellon Post-Doctoral Rome Prize Fellow in Modern Italian Studies in 2010-11. She's the translator and editor of *Locomotrix: Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, a book she talked about the last time she was on this program, and a book that was awarded the Academy of American Poets' Raiziss/De Palchi Book Prize. Her own poetry collections include *From Dame Quickly* and the bilingual *Thing Ode*. Her most recent book is entitled *Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice*. It was just published by Columbia University Press, and it's a book that takes us into the psychogeography of the city of Venice. Welcome, Jennifer Scappettone.

**Jennifer Scappettone:** Thank you Leonard. It's great to be talking with you again.

**LS:** Great to be talking with you. We met at a party near Columbia University last spring, and even though you were jetlagged you were telling me about this book—*Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice*. What we spoke about that night was the ecological imperative of global warming, which means that the Dutch model of blocking water out of our cities is...it's probably too late for that, and the future looks a lot more like Venice, as in cities with canals. You spoke about the architecture of Venice, where everything is sinking, which may offer a better vision of the future of architecture than dykes do, with their ambition to block the water out. Your book, of course, goes into the history of literature and art and architecture about Venice, but also *patterned by Venice*. Could you tell me a little about the trajectory of the book, and then maybe we can talk about specific figures and chapters in the larger city or psychogeography that is Venice?

**JS:** Sure. There are many ways to describe the book's trajectory. One of them is the ecological trajectory that you just traced with your amazing memory of a conversation we had quite a number of months ago now.

**LS:** I wasn't jetlagged.

[Laughing]

**JS:** The book begins with an apocalyptic flood that occurred in 1966, when all the clichés about the sinking of the city of Venice suddenly took on a kind of horrific reality. In fact, it became discovered through a series of subsequent studies that the flooding wasn't just due to natural developments, but very much to the industrial development of Port Marghera on the mainland: that the dredging of canals for petrol tankers and the like had actually destabilized the lagoon's foundations. I start with that moment in order immediately to do away with any notion that this book would be about some dreamlike mirage of a city, completely disconnected from the everyday world and from the phenomenon that we call modernity. Then I begin to trace a genealogy of authors that was committed to representing Venice in its distressed state, in the harsh light of realism. These authors, the ones that I treat, are post-Romantic, meaning that they're operating in the shadow of figures like William Wordsworth and Byron—Byron, who famously would take his morning swim down the Grand Canal, and who took many lovers in the city of Venice, and wrote in fascinating ways about the city's history and actuality. Then I move through a series of Ruskin's inheritors, although they're not generally regarded as such; they are Henry James, Ezra Pound, the Futurists, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Andrea Zanzotto, Italo Calvino and a

number of contemporary authors, including, even, the New York School and Derek Walcott at the very end of the book.

**LS:** Yes.

**JS:** So I try to show how all these writers are grappling with the heritage of Romanticism through what is perhaps the most romantic and romanticized European city—the city of Venice.

**LS:** That's great. Of course we'll get to Marinetti, the Futurist author who penned the phrase "killing the moonlight" in one of his manifestos, in order to be able to move toward a future, which you complicate by suggesting that Venice is the future.

You begin the book, though, with Robert Duncan—and there's a strong strand in the book of Anglo-American responses to Venice. You begin with an epigraph from Duncan's "The Venice Poem" ("Pure ingenuity could not devise / such a nightingale"), and with a kind of ekphrastic account of a piece of visual art by Bruce Nauman. So I wondered if you could say a little about the American modernist response to Venice. Of course we'll talk about Pound later on, but you begin with later artists like Duncan and Nauman, and your interest in the way in which Venice has been unconsciously affecting or influencing American writing and art.

**JS:** Sure. I wasn't able to discuss "The Venice Poem" at length because my manuscript was so large, and there is such an unwieldy number of authors who wrote about Venice—so I wanted to begin the book with a kind of talisman of associations that exceed the bounds of criticism. But one of the things that interests me about Robert Duncan's engagement with Venice is that he's writing it in the shadow of many of his elders who wrote about Venice, most immediately Ezra Pound; he's writing in 1948. And yet his work is completely devoid of the macho anxiety of influence that critic Harold Bloom canonized, which still governs our thinking about literary history. Instead we have a decidedly queer poem that is thus honest about the passion that's embedded in its echoing of earlier texts, rather than being a kind of masculinist overcoming of Duncan's forebears—an overcoming which, I go on to argue, typifies a modernist approach to history. This quote comes out of a section of "The Venice Poem" that reads:

To savour lust and to create  
from lust love's  
immortality —  
like Venice  
created out of the  
waters, or Venus  
who rides  
upon her invented chariot-shell,

fills the poet's ingenuous machine  
with her radiance.  
Pure ingenuity could not devise  
such a nightingale.

This quote interests me for what it says. The nightingale is a Romantic figure, as Venice is a Romantic figure—but like Venice, the nightingale can't be devised by a single subject's ingenuity or invention. I try to show over and over again in the book that Venice wasn't the product of ingenious design like more modern cities, such as St. Petersburg or Brasilia. It wasn't generated all at once by a plan, but instead grew organically and piecemeal, out of many responses to contingency, and in a continual collaboration with the tides.

As Duncan expresses in this quote, the poet's ingenious machinery is not enough to capture the signatures embedded in this kind of radiant locale that every poet ends up echoing and collaborating with, whether he or she likes it or not—with this infinite regress of earlier authors who have been there before, and have written through one another. It interests me that there is a strong Anglo-American genealogy of authors who've written about Venice, but that Venice compels one into a comparative, global way of thinking about literature, because you can't write about Venice exclusively through Anglo-American or Italian authors: Thomas Mann always

has to be part of the conversation somewhere; Marcel Proust is always somewhere in peripheral vision. How do you actually account for this immense network of writers? That was a real challenge as I was developing the text.

**LS:** You write at the end of your introduction to the book (titled "Venetian Modernity"):

This book is an experiment in criticism that thinks implicitly with the material in phenomenological and constructivist modes. If Venice is a place of inherent transience and possibility, its continual mixing and regeneration provide the ultimate vehicle for a history of cultural interaction that does not homogenize. Criticism committed to fascination will always have a labyrinthine relationship to explanation, multiplying alignments as it pursues revised outlooks and revisited grounds. But this series of detours from the capitals of modernity hopes to clarify why their *passé* urban other remains—in spite of every cliché—a productively estranging place.

So there's a lot there to unpack and to think about. But as you were speaking a moment ago, I was thinking about a famous text, a famous passage in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. He's in Rome and he's looking at the way in which levels

of civilization are built one on top of the other, and you can see one level built on top of the other as opposed to replacing it, which he then says is like the unconscious. So Freud's notion of the unconscious is connected to his observations of architecture and archaeology in Rome. What would be the metaphor, or one of the metaphors, that we could begin with for thinking about a division of the mind that arises out of studying and seeing in Venice?

**JS:** One of the reasons I wanted to write about Venice was the presence of anachronistic juxtapositions there that are never evened out, because it's impossible to create a tabula rasa in the lagoon and build all over again, in the way that was possible in the terra firma city of Rome. Mussolini could create an "imperial street"—the Via dell'Impero, a route of circulation that was transparent and direct—and in doing so attempt to revive the ancient imperial Rome. Although Venice has this palimpsestic quality, it actually resists archaeology, because once you dig in Venice, you've dug through the foundations. You need to retain the foundations that were created through great labor and at great cost. For those who don't know how Venice was created: it's formed out of many pieces of timber, these wood piles, that were sunk into the lagoon and that then petrified due to some miracle of the chemical interaction with the water. And it's a series of islands (over a hundred islands) that have been imperfectly bridged.

And so any attempt at archaeology can only go so far, and what you actually end up with is a series of foundations that were shaped in a prior period, which need to be worked with.

This ends up being developed over the course of the book as a literary strategy as well. Which is to say that one of the things that fascinates me most about Venice is the fact that it constitutes this absolute rebuke to the notion of originality: the marvel of its existence rising out of swamps has inspired so many writers across the centuries that its own originality trumps the authenticity of the writer. Any one of the Romantics ends up rehearsing clichés in a way that's pretty enthralling for a contemporary writer in our moment when the notion of unoriginal and uncreative writing is dominant. So I write about the way that, just as Venetians needed to work with the foundations that were already present in, say, the Byzantine era (even when remodeling churches in a kind of neoclassical Renaissance style), writers need to write through the language, the terms, the tropes of the authors that have come before them. I argue that any act of writing about Venice constitutes an act of *writing through*, and I'm echoing John Cage and Jackson Mac Low in that formation.

**LS:** From that point of view, can you talk a little bit about Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, which is a seminal book about Venice (the informed tourist

who goes to Venice will have read that book)? I think, from reading your book, that you enjoy and are intrigued by Ruskin. Yet “stone” or “stones” are probably the wrong metaphor to think about Venice with, given what you just described as the miracle of the petrified wood or the miracle of the chemically transformed wood that the islands were built on, the presence of water, the absence or the impossibility of archaeology going too far because the sedimentation vanishes into the water. Could you say a little about the problematics of Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*?

**JS:** Sure. Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, first of all, I just want to say, is one of the great unread books in the English language—I mean unread except for the “Nature of Gothic” section that was beloved by William Morris, and is a part of the Marxist tradition. It’s this utter anomaly of a book. Ruskin wanted to write a cautionary tale to his fellow Englishmen about the fall of empire, using Venice as a negative example. But instead of writing a linear history, he becomes overly committed to a kind of materialism that he develops, in which he’s unable to abstract a narrative from the materials of the city and the chaos of its current neglect and colonial occupation by the Habsburg Empire. He tries to write a history of Venice out of its stones; but these stones are quite battered, and they’re continually subject to the motion of the tides. It’s a Venice that he claims has

written her history “on the white scrolls of the sea-surges.” He wants so much to write a history out of the materials of Venice, and yet how do you capture the scrolls of the sea in writing? It’s a project that is impossible from the get-go. But I try to argue that this is what makes the prose of *The Stones of Venice* so fascinating: as a structure, it’s a very elliptical work that’s subject to endless qualifications, and develops this kind of perspective that is *motile*, we might say. And it ends up being sort of multiperspectival, something that takes you through the city—that *walks you through* the city, and exposes you to the anarchic occupation of the historical city by the current moment.

**LS:** You really have me thinking about Ruskin now. Yet I also want to look at some of the Italian writers that are important here, commenting on Venice itself, and of course one of the most important figures in your book is the Futurist Marinetti. *Killing the Moonlight*, your title, is drawn from one of his texts. One of Marinetti’s manifestos, “Against Passéist Venice,” reads something like this:

We repudiate antique Venice, exhausted and undone by centuries-old voluptuousnesses, which even we once loved and possessed in a grand nostalgic dream.

We repudiate the Venice of outsiders, market of fakers and antiquarians, magnet of snobbery and of universal imbecility, bed unbottomed by caravans of lovers, hip bath bejeweled for cosmopolite courtesans, Cloaca Maxima of passéism.

We want to heal and cicatrize this putrescent city, magnificent sore of the past. We want to reanimate and nobilize the Venetian populace, fallen into decay from its antique greatness, morphinized by a nauseating cowardice and vilified by the habit of its fishy little trades.

We want to prepare for the birth of an industrial and military Venice that would dominate the Adriatic Sea, great Italian lake.

Let us rush to fill the small stinking canals with the rubble of the crumbling and leprous old palaces.

Let's burn the gondolas, rocking easychairs for idiots, and erect the imposing geometry of metallic bridges and factories plumbing with smoke to the sky, to abolish the falling curves of old architectures.

Let the reign of divine Electric Light come to liberate Venice from its venal moonlight of bedrooms for rent.

That's from 1910. Can you comment on that text and Marinetti, and Marinetti's role in your book?

**JS:** Sure. First of all, since we spoke about translation in an earlier program, I just want to note that that was a very fun text to translate...

[*Laughing*]

**LS:** I can imagine. You translated that text so well.

**JS:** ...because it is so decadent and voluptuous in itself. But the set of manifestos against Venice that Marinetti and the Futurists co-signed became central texts in my book, because I wanted to figure out why it was Venice that constituted the first concrete city to be attacked by Futurism—which was the first self-conscious movement of the historical avant-garde. And it becomes clear that Venice was this object of attack because it represented everything that must be rejected in the name of erecting a new modern nation-state of Italy, which was belated in its formation with respect to other European nation-states. The Futurists want to ward off all signs of what they call “passéism”: illness, decadence and decay, foreignness, which gets coded as Eastern (and Venice had an age-old commerce with the East), curvaceousness. And all of these qualities come together insofar as they are the hallmarks of femininity, with the Venetian courtesan and the effete, sick Romantic poet being the opposite of the



virile warriors that Futurism (and eventually Fascism) put forward as protagonists.

So I'm writing a history of modernism through this feminized, abjected underbelly of both modernity and the historical avant-garde. In a way I'm arguing that Venice killed the avant-garde, because even Marinetti, as he's writing these manifestos, says, *Oh, we too wallowed in your penumbras*. It could be argued that he's still wallowing in those penumbras as he writes, building up a really thick prose, dense with clichéd tropes. And he never quite gets away from Venice. He is writing about it until the end of his life. I'm now translating a work called *Venezianella e Studentaccio*, which he wrote from a war-torn Venice in 1944. It's a 125-page "aeronovel or aeropoem," non-punctuated, in which he's imagining the rebirth of Venice as a giant female colossus of Murano glass. [Laughing]. It becomes the place which is most rejected by the Futurists, but also most obsessively haunts Futurism, and produces this kind of haunted modernism.

**LS:** Really intriguing. Just to state the obvious, Venice is Venus, and the goddess Venus crystallizes out of some mysterious play of light and water on the ocean, and appears whole amongst the gods, a mystery. So that sense of Venice as feminine or feminized in the very name of Venus is there. Then in your chapter on Marinetti and "Adriatic Fantasies," you write:

Effluvial Venice, a wellspring of revulsion but also of fertility for the avant-garde, emerges as the double of that feminized basin of industrial sludge from which Marinetti was born a Futurist in the prologue to the founding manifesto. In rebuking its "centuries-old voluptuousnesses," Marinetti's "Against Passéist Venice" had set Venice as the decadent inverse, both decaying and overly urbane, of the tropological 'past' represented by a hybrid, industrialized Mater: the factory drain presided over by the memory of his Sudanese nurse's breast.

A wonderful kind of detail there, and in terms of fleshing out the gendered nature of thinking and writing about Venice, you chose *Killing the Moonlight* as your title, which suggests a certain sympathy for Marinetti in some ways. Is that wrong, what I just said?

**JS:** Let's say that I very much agree with Marinetti's rejection of this Romantic fascination with Venice that actually encrusts the city with a kind of touristic patina, and really is part of its death sentence. And I have a lot of sympathy for his wanting to bring Venice into the modern period, and to force tourists to apprehend the city as a living thing. I also very much sympathize with his aesthetics to a certain degree, and I find his writing endlessly fascinating. So the taking of the title *Killing the Moonlight* is a very ambivalent gesture. On the one hand, I

want to show that Venice represents a rebuke to Enlightenment. On the other, I have sympathy for the killing of the moonlight in which most foreigners, especially authors, want to cast the city—such that it becomes this stagnant metaphor that just keeps churning in the same terms over and over again, without much direction or evolution. This is the case even in the work of literary critics who read works written about Venice, or in which Venice becomes a kind of picturesque backdrop. I was much more interested in any kind of work that sees the city itself as an agent, shaping space actively, and shaping writing and cognition actively in turn.

**LS:** So in that sense Marinetti is a kind of prophet. If it wasn't true in his own period, then certainly you document afterward that Venice becomes not a city but a museum, and you document even in terms of real estate that most of the old city of Venice—the major palazzos and so on, are owned by foreigners whose money is parked there or invested there simply for the pleasure of owning a palazzo or a home in Venice. If it is no longer a living city, then it is indeed a museum as opposed to a city that contains museums in it. Really intriguing, Jennifer. We're only halfway through your book and all the way through our time for the program. I'm hoping we can catch up with you very soon, maybe for next week, to continue talking about *Killing the Moonlight*, because it really is an intriguing problematic you just laid out for us, and we've only gotten as far as Marinetti.

**JS:** Sure.

## [ PART 2 ]

**LS:** We haven't yet gotten to Ezra Pound, such a key figure in American poetry and a key figure in your book. Could you explain or talk a little bit about Pound in Venice, and the ways in which you think perhaps Pound's compositional strategy is built or based in the architecture of Venice?

**JS:** Sure. Pound, like Marinetti, has a career-long engagement with Venice, so his writing about it changes over the course of the decades. But one of the facts that interested me most was that the year before Marinetti launches his manifesto "Against Passéist Venice," in 1908, Pound is in Venice, and he is able to self-publish his first collection of poems there: *A Lume Spento*, again referring to light. The title is translated by Pound as *With Tapers Quenched*. Venice is the sort of place that's always associated with light, or darkness, and the fact that he names the book that way was fascinating to me. On the colophon of *A Lume Spento*, he notes that the book was printed "IN THE CITY OF ALDUS." There he's referring to Aldus Manutius, the radical Renaissance

publisher of important editions of collected poems like the *terze rime* of Dante, and Petrarch. And so I get to begin the chapter by talking about Pound's transformation of the role of the poet. The poet in Venice, and in Pound's career, becomes as much an editor and a translator as an original, authentic voice. Pound's early work is decidedly archaic, and is occupying the late-Victorian mode of address and metrical strategies, and a kind of archaic diction. These have often been treated by critics as modes that he entirely rejected once he started preaching about the luminous detail, and became an Imagist, and then a Vorticist. I was really interested, instead, in the continuity in Pound's production: the way in which archaism lingers in *The Cantos*, and the ways in which a kind of decadence pervades even his later work. That said, when he comes up with the strategy for composing *The Cantos*, it's obviously through constructing texts by way of these radical juxtapositions. I became fascinated with the Venetian *Cantos*, and his work with the Venetian archives, and his treatment of the Venetian archipelago as a sort of structural force—as a place where stone and water are in a continual, reciprocal dialogue with one another, a kind of *interference* between stone and water. It enables Pound to construct this monumental poem that isn't a static, monumental thing, but one in which fluidity and interstitial space provide a site of relationships between the juxtaposed elements of the poem. *The Cantos* are obviously very difficult to

talk about in any concise way, but I could just sum up what I argue in the section on the Venetian *Cantos* by saying I read *The Cantos* as a kind of archipelagic form, in which these juxtaposed times and languages are set into relation with one another. And that is a phenomenon that's always at work in Venice, which is a city of 118 islands that are bridged, but in which the seams are just as much an integral part of the city as the streets are—the seams being the various canals and *rii*, a word that refers to “rivers” or “rivulets.” We have one word for canal, whereas the Venetians have many.

**LS:** That was an intriguing point, when you described the vocabulary for canals that delineate different types of canals, and different ways that parts of the city are connected to other parts of the city, by a bridge (which is the only word we have for it) or by different kinds of canals, or different kinds of pavements and roadways. Now it's really intriguing to hear you talk about the relationship between “make it new,” which is Pound's imperative or dictum to the poetry world, and his own interest in the classical world, in an archaic world—and, you argue, in archaic forms of diction as well.

There's one passage you cite, I believe it's *Canto* 72, which reads:

The will is old but the hand is new,  
Listen to me before I turn back into the night  
Where the skull sings:  
The regiments and the banners will return.

Anything you could say about that passage, the way it hearkens to certain militant elements of Italian Futurism, but has the “make it new” (“the hand is new”) and has the presence of the old “will” as well?

**JS:** That is a part of *The Cantos* in which Pound eulogizes Marinetti, who passed away on December 2, 1944. Pound sees Marinetti’s ghost in a Dante-esque dialogue that he imagines between himself and the Futurist, and in this passage Pound places his own “passéism” into dialogue with Marinetti’s will for the new at all costs. I would say that this is the low point of Pound’s anachronism, insofar as he wants it to perfectly harmonize with the agenda of the Fascist state—insofar as he’s trying to recuperate this archaeology of a kind of imperial, and very much Roman, heritage and bring it into the new nation-state. I also trace the way that Venice becomes demonized in certain areas of *The Cantos*. It’s not always this heavenly place where gods appear and so forth; it’s also this swamp that needs to be reclaimed. And that echoes, in a really fascinating way, the actual reclamation of the swamps that was being undertaken by the Fascist regime, particularly in the south of Italy at the time, south of Rome.

**LS:** The last time we spoke, we discussed the threat of Venice turning into a museum as opposed to a city, and in your chapter on “Fabulous Planning” (in which you talk about Venetian architects in the twentieth century, and the mayor of Venice who was also involved in architecture at one point—maybe we’ll talk about him) you provide some statistics:

Between 1966 and 2006, a population of 120,000 was halved, leaving the ratio of tourists to residents at two hundred to one, with 25 percent of the remaining inhabitants over 64 years of age. In 1995, about 14 percent of the dwellings in the city center were unoccupied; authorities currently estimate that 70 percent of the city’s private rental housing is occupied by nonresidents. Housing and transportation crises have escalated in tandem with the rising numbers of tourists that disembark annually, provoking swells of one-day sightseers, or *pendolari* (“commuter” tourists), raising prices, provoking the establishment of trinket shops and hotels in the place of basic services to citizens such as bakeries and daycare facilities, and leading the vast majority of the city’s laborers to emigrate from the historical center to the mainland zone of Mestre, while offices and plans for fancy commercial towers like Pierre Cardin’s “Palais Lumière” attempt to

take up residence in the postindustrial zones of Marghera.

So I guess I want to ask you a question about Venice as a city, as a real city. You're a literary scholar, and much of the work you're doing pertaining to Venice is looking at the texts produced about Venice or produced by the psychogeography of Venice in terms of their compositional nature, but also a little bit about what happens when you visit Venice, and what kind of research you might have done in person visiting the city.

**JS:** *[Laughing]* Well, when you're writing about a city there really is no border where your research ends, and that is one of its great challenges. It absolutely refuses to coalesce as a coherent phenomenon, and it's always changing. As I tried to explain my interest in Venice, I was always met with the charge that Venice is dead and that the museumification (even what some have called the Disneyfication) of Venice are the final nails in the coffin. And there were great artists in Venice like the composer Luigi Nono who said that decades ago. But I try to grapple with this problem—which is a problem for all historical cities now, not just Venice. It just becomes more *obvious* in Venice. Is the development of Venice as a site of historical tourism and as the site of, contemporaneously, numerous pioneering global biennials of art, of film, of architecture, and of

music and dance, a sign of the city's death, or can it be a revivifying force? It's clear given the statistics that you just read back to me, and which are truly crushing, that the city has basically turned its back on the Venetians—and those few who can afford to live there are the ones that have some kind of historical capital, or that are bringing in new capital, but from afar. But I think that we all need to grapple with how museums and biennials can bring new ideas and energy into a city like Venice. One of the best examples of that energy is the IUAV, or the Architectural Institute of Venice, which was founded in the 1920s, but became a very active crucible for critical thinking (particularly leftist critical thinking) in the postwar period. Many of the people who were working and writing out of the Architectural Institute of Venice were involved with various kinds of initiatives to revivify Venice. Many of these initiatives, unfortunately, were ultimately turned down, like the building of a palace on the Grand Canal by Frank Lloyd Wright; the development of a hospital by Le Corbusier; the development of various sites by the maverick architect Carlo Scarpa, some of which did eventually get built. I can't say that I ever came to a conclusion; and I keep following the trends of depopulation and museumification in Venice, and basically wringing my hands, hoping we can turn the tides back.

**LS:** This is an intriguing nest of issues. I mean you do have a whole chapter, or a section of a chapter, on the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Las Vegas that Sheldon Adelson commissioned in an attempt to reproduce, down to the most fine detail, the appearance of Venice, so that you can go to Las Vegas and be in “Venice.” But you also write about the IUAV, the group of architects you just mentioned, and I’m going to read a passage back to you again from “Fabulous Planning.” You write:

These discussions were shaped by the history and actuality of their host city, even when directed at other geographies—while insisting on a principle, inherited from the historicism of Benedetto Croce and Antonio Gramsci, that history must dispel rather than inspire nostalgia. The IUAV has attracted considerable critical attention in Europe and North America...

And then you go on to describe some of the members of that group. But that idea that we need a history that must dispel rather than inspire nostalgia—is that an attempt to navigate between Marinetti’s “destroy the place” and Sheldon Adelson’s “let’s simply reproduce the place wherever we want—in Macao, in Las Vegas, etc.”?

**JS:** Yes, I would say that’s the gamut of negative hearkening to Venice, and that the attempt to write

about history from the perspective of the present that practitioners and theorists like Massimo Cacciari and Manfredo Tafuri were undertaking in the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s is on a continuum with the work that Ruskin was trying to do. Ruskin is treated as this out-of-date moralist, and yet what he was really trying to do was to tear away the Romantic veils that had been laid over the place by literature and romance, so that we might confront what he calls the fragments of Venice. He actually calls them the “magnificent fragments,” viewed in this brutal light of the present moment. And that is the mission of writing and understanding history in order to dispel nostalgia: to understand what forces of production and of conflict were operative then, so that we can act in the present, and enable different types of construction, different types of (or sometimes the *same* types of!) infrastructural strategies. I mean, there’s much we can learn from Venice if we don’t look at it as merely a picturesque site—if we actually look at it as a series of responses to the problem of flooding discussed earlier. (Although the strange thing is that, in the early modern period, the problem with Venice was that rivers were carrying silt down their courses and the lagoon was actually being filled in, so that Venice was going to become a city of land; this wasn’t good for the Venetian Republic, because they needed the water as a natural defense, and as a way of continuing their not quite global, but very extensive trade with the East, which was really the foundation

of their republic and empire.) To see Venice as this series of ingenious acts of collaboration with natural and economic forces is to learn something about the past that can maybe help us now. And as I had mentioned in that conversation that you hearkened to way at the beginning of our first conversation, engineers like Guy Nordenson have actually been looking to Venice as an example of a place where the water is seen as a fundamental part of the city, rather than just some kind of negative space around the city, to come up with solutions for the problem of rising waters around New York. I would say that's a way of engaging history to dispel nostalgia as well, even though Nordenson is an engineer.

**LS:** That's fantastic that Venice, because of its history, provides us a possibility of thinking about a future in which we're going to have to deal with rising seas because of global warming. That can't be halted or arrested at this point, and therefore Venetian solutions need to be looked at, since they've been dealing with this problem for much longer.

There is a collaboration, a specific collaboration, between the filmmaker Fellini and the poet Andrea Zanzotto, that I wanted to ask you to talk about. I think it's relevant here because, as I understand it, Fellini asked the poet to come up with a Venetian dialect that could be spoken in a film he was making, and what Zanzotto came up with was not something

that was "authentic," or rooted exclusively in the past, but involves a poetic imagination of a Venetian dialect that could maybe be spoken in the future—which then became part of his own poetic corpus, well beyond the limits of the film. So I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that collaboration, and what that might suggest about Venice as generative as opposed to simply a museum.

**JS:** Sure. When Fellini was making his film about Casanova he wrote to Zanzotto because in a prior book, *La Beltà*, Zanzotto had been working with a language called *petèl*, which is a kind of baby talk of the Veneto region. Fellini asked him to tap that baby babble, that "milky" dialect, for several scenes—and Fellini described it using these terms, which very much have to do with maternity and fecundity. He wanted a recitative that the crowd could be reciting as they yoke a female ritual head out of the lagoon, and as it ultimately sinks down to the bottom of the lagoon, because their contraption for it fails; and that ends up becoming a metaphor for the ineffability of this fecund Venetian font of meaning. Zanzotto, interestingly, is not from Venice, but from the Veneto (the region that encloses Venice, but on the mainland). He didn't try to create an authentic dialect; he forged it with a lot of fantasy, and in work that he wrote thereafter, he's always allowing the dialect to live, bringing pieces of the dialect into contact with, say, the language of film. In *Filò*, translated as *Peasants*

Wake, he writes about the “earth-head” (which would be that head of the great Venetian fetish) coming back to him from the “hereafter of dead diffuse light and celluloid”: so that the primordial sign for Venetian fecundity is paradoxically coming to him from the hereafter of film. So there’s this undecidable relationship between new technology, or at least what was then fairly new technology, and this ancient wellspring of fecundity that seems to be part of the swampy landscape of the Venetian lagoon. I take that as an ultimate example of the way in which local, traditional materials can live, you know, and be allowed to change. The Venetian dialect and Venetian historical materials don’t have to be preserved in amber, but can be part of these fecund exchanges in which past and present are in a reciprocally interfering relationship to one another.

**LS:** You then go on to provide a bit of a text from “Peasants Wake,” a poem that Zanzotto wrote in the Venetian dialect he invented for *Casanova*, Fellini’s film. I wonder if I could ask you to read those four lines in the Venetian dialect and then in your own translation of them into English?

**JS:** Yes, with the proviso that I’m reading with an Italian accent rather than a truly Venetian one. And I’ll just say before I read it that my translation of this is in standard English, rather than dialect, and that is an insoluble problem of translation. But it goes:

inte la gran laguna, inte la gran lacuna—  
la é ‘l pien e ‘l vódo dela testa-tera  
che tas, o zhigna e usma un pas pi in là  
de quel che mai se podaràe dirse, far nostro...

in the great lagoon, in the great lacuna—  
there’s the plenitude and void of the earth-head  
who keeps silent, or winks and sniffs out a  
track beyond,  
one we could never name or make our own...

**LS:** Jennifer, we’ve been speaking about your book now for two programs, for an hour or so, and I feel like we’ve barely scratched the surface. But I wanted to thank you for spending the time with us so we can delve into *Killing the Moonlight: Modernism in Venice*. Thank you so much.

**JS:** Thank you, Leonard. It’s been a great pleasure.





# AFTERWORD

BY MAGDALENA EDWARDS

Yolanda Castaño, Jennifer Scappettone and Raúl Zurita are poet-translators, poets who write and translate poetry, as well as border crossers in their poetic production. As a constellation shaped by this chapbook, *Psychogeographical Romance: Three Interviews*, their work assures us that contemporary poetry engages equally with nature and with digital technology's infinite topographies, as intimately with the word on the page as with image and sound. And then there is the question of echoing, exhuming and challenging literary tradition in turn; all this alongside the bittersweet truths and horrors of contemporary life with its seemingly multiplying marginalized identities, continual erasure of historical trauma, and the dirty secrets of our era's mass production and consumption. Not to mention the urgency of the female voice we all, these poets would argue in their own way, carry: mother Earth, mother tongue, motherland, mother containing the other within. Of course each of the poets at hand (Castaño, Scappettone and Zurita) has a unique set of poetic and stylistic concerns that bears out through an individual use of language and form, as well as choices made regarding the canvas or mis-

en-scène, whether the page, the body, the natural landscape or the screen.

Yes, these poets honor Pound's "Make it new," as Leonard Schwartz articulates in his introduction. They also speak to what they see before them, in the middle of this journey where humankind seems to have lost its way. I will end with the opening lines of Dante's *Inferno*, which Raúl Zurita is translating into Spanish (and which provocatively inflects Castaño's and Scappettone's work), here as translated by Seamus Heaney:

In the middle of the journey of our life  
I found myself astray in a dark wood  
where the straight road had been lost sight of.  
How hard it is to say what it was like  
in the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense  
and gnarled  
the very thought of it renews my panic.  
It is bitter almost as death itself is bitter.  
But to rehearse the good it also brought me  
I will speak about the other things I saw there.

## AUTHOR BIOS



**Yolanda Castaño** is a Galician poet, painter and literary critic. She has been the General Secretary of the Association of Galician-Language Writers. She has published six poetry books in Galician and Spanish (*Depth of Field* and *The second tongue* are her most recent titles), several chapbooks and a pair of compilations. She has won poetry awards including the National Critics Award, the Espiral Maior Poetry Award, the Fundación Novacaixagalicia, the Ojo Crítico (best poetry book by a young author in Spain) and the Author of the Year Galician Booksellers' Award, apart from being shortlisted for the National Poetry Prize.



**Magdalena Edwards** was born in Santiago, Chile, and raised in Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. Her thesis on Raúl Zurita's *Purgatorio*, written while an undergraduate at Harvard, led to a stint with the "Artes & Letras" section of Chile's leading newspaper, *El Mercurio*. She received a PhD in Comparative Literature from UCLA with a dissertation on Elizabeth Bishop. Her work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Rattle*, *The Critical Flame*, *Rewire Me* and *The Millions*.



**Forrest Gander** is a writer and translator with degrees in geology and English literature. His book *Core Samples from the World* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Among his many translations are the recent *Fungus Skull Eye Wing: Selected Poems of Alfonso D'Aquino* and, with Raúl Zurita, *Pinholes in the Night: Essential Poems from Latin America*. Gander's latest title is *The Trace*, a novel.



Photo by Dino Ignani

**Jennifer Scappettone** is a poet, translator and scholar with particular interests in the reciprocal interference of language, architecture and public space. She is the author of the poetry collection *From Dame Quickly*. *Exit 43*, a cross-genre work on toxic archaeologies and salvage, is in progress for Atelos Press, with a letterpress palimpsest (*A Chorus Fosse*) out soon from Compline. She edited and translated *Locomotrix: Selected Poetry and Prose of Amelia Rosselli*, and is curator of *PennSound Italiana*, an audiovisual sector of the PennSound archive, devoted to contemporary Italian experimental poetry. Her visual and sound poems have been installed in Berkeley, Brussels, Chicago, Ghent, Nagoya, New York City, Los Angeles, Rome and Turin. She has collaborated with a range of architects, dancers, musicians and designers, including most recently Marco Ariano and Walter Paradiso, Kathy Westwater and Seung Jae Lee, Paul Rudy and AGENCY architecture.



Photo by Carlos David

**Leonard Schwartz's** most recent collection of poetry is *IF*. His *Cine-Poems and Other: Selected Poems of Benjamin Fondane* comes out with The New York Review of Books in January 2016.



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