ON POETICS IDENTITY & LATINIDAD

CantoMundo POETS SPEAK OUT

Curated by ROSEBUD BEN-ONI
with an afterword by
CELESTE GUZMÁN MENDOZA

Millicent Borges Accardi
Marcelo Hernandez Castillo
Darrel Alejandro Holnes
Amy Sayre Baptista
David Tomas Martinez
Ruben Quesada

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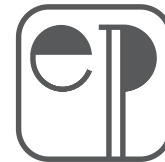
ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



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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 cultures.

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CONTENTS

Introduction
by Rosebud Ben-Oni vi

David Tomas Martinez
and Ruben Quesada 1

Millicent Borges Accardi
and Amy Sayre Baptista 17

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo
and Darrel Alejandro Holnes 34

Afterword
by Celeste Guzmán Mendoza 43

Author Bios 46

INTRODUCTION

—Rosebud Ben-Oni

When I first applied to CantoMundo, I was worried that my mixed upbringing (my mother being Mexican and my father being Jewish) would automatically "disqualify" me. But the founders embrace the multicultural, multiracial and overall complicated identity that is Latina/o. While I've had many influences in my life, I had struggled with the idea of identity, and never had a real writers' community in which to engage in ideas. After my first CantoMundo retreat, I felt intertwined with a multitude of individuals united by the necessity to grow as poets. I learned that Latina/o poetics, as much as Latina/o identity, does not have to have a singular defining trait, perspective or voice. This was liberating for me as a poet, and the inspiration for this curated conversational series was those hot June days at the 2013 retreat, with temperatures well over 100 degrees, with days that fell into night while the

conversations never stopped: they only morphed into new ones. It is my pleasure to bring you six immensely talented poets and CantoMundo fellows.

DAVID TOMAS MARTINEZ AND RUBEN QUESADA

Rosebud Ben-Oni: What led you to poetry?

David Tomas Martinez: The honest answer to why I got into poetry? Because I didn't know any better, because going to college was as improbable as making a living through poetry, and my parents, who were not college-educated, didn't have the authoritative stance they normally have. Honestly, as a teenager, I didn't think I was going to live past 23, so why not take a chance? Also, I had what all writers have, a strong sense of ego coupled with crippling bouts of self-criticism and doubt—in other words, I wanted to prove myself to others but believed I was special enough to prove myself. I look back, and I have done a lot of crazy stuff, but it was by far the craziest.

I had a child as a senior in high school. Seventeen and no diploma. I went to adult school after a brief stint working in a shipyard, so that I could join the Navy. The Navy changed many things for me. It allowed me to

separate from the gang life in which I was entrenched, and gain some perspective as to what I could become. I was discharged a year later and attended Job Corps and pursued house painting. While at Job Corps, the "coach" of the intramural basketball team noticed my potential as a basketball player and asked if I had interest in playing basketball at the local junior college. It was a dream for me. Unfortunately, I had no idea how college worked and showed up to the first day of classes without a class or being enrolled or any materials particularly attributed to being a student. I may have had a pencil, but I seriously doubt it.

Ruben Quesada: I have always been an introvert. Having had minimal contact with classmates and kids outside of school, I turned to writing. I wrote to those I knew. I wrote them letters that I'd never share. I wrote to the girls I had crushes on; I wrote to my sisters who made me angry; I wrote to my mother whom I'd started to think didn't understand me. Eventually, in high school, I'd come to understand that my writing could be crafted. I'd read poetry in school, but I never understood its place in my life.

In my senior year of high school an English teacher, Lucila Dypiangco, assigned extra credit to enter the inaugural *Los Angeles Times* Cesar Chavez essay/poetry contest. I missed the deadline for extra credit but a classmate, Irma Rodriguez, pushed me to enter the contest on my own. I did. And I won. Poetry filled an emptiness. It was through poetry that I could be heard and I could be imaginative.

RBO: Why study poetry and why a PhD?

RQ: My mother always insisted that with education I would be successful. With her encouragement and the guidance of a high school counselor, I was admitted into NYU's Dramatic Writing program and San Francisco State University's Creative Writing Department, but making a decision on where to attend was beyond my control. I couldn't afford to go anywhere. I didn't receive enough funding to attend either school, and my mother certainly couldn't afford to pay for anything. My older sisters all went to a local community college and eventually earned their undergraduate degrees. And I followed in their footsteps.

After finishing high school, I worked and went to East Los Angeles College part-time, where I learned about poetry from poet Carol Lem. I transferred into a creative-writing program that would allow me to continue to work and attend school. I earned an undergraduate degree from the Creative Writing Department at University of California, Riverside (UCR) and I continued working for the next five years. After saving money and paying

off debt, I returned to UCR to complete an MFA, and during the last year of the program I took a literature course and found my love for literary theory. I knew then that I wanted to pursue a doctorate degree that would allow me to explore literary theory and continue to write poetry.

DTM: I never ended up playing basketball. I got a job and continued to go to school. Even when I was younger, and spent my days hanging out and gangbanging, I still would try and go home and read philosophy, such as Nietzsche's, not that I understood the books, but I wanted to know more. My plan has always been to get one degree, and go to work. First it was my associate's degree, then it was my bachelor's, then it was my master's, and now it is my doctorate.

Each time I was ready to stop learning, there were figures in my life encouraging me to further my education. I feel like the ghost in the machine, the tick that makes the television turn on without anyone touching it. I have no idea how I got into the academy, beyond the fact that, for whatever reason, people have taken an interest in me and my work. And the only reason I chose poetry was because I enjoyed working through and understanding a poem. Those anthologized poems seemed so wondrous, with their enumerated lines and paper reminiscent of the bible, and those anthologized

poems seemed so distant from my reality. The obvious next step was creating your own poem. Which I did not do very well, but I am not one of those false-modesty poets, and looking back I do recognize moves that would intrigue me about a student. Or at least I like to tell myself that and give a boost to my teaching and early work.

RBO: Has your upbringing/identity affected you?

DTM: Much of my identity has been guided by location, being born in San Diego, California, near the border, product of a biracial relationship, of working-class stock. Neither of my parents have a college degree, so my childhood was pretty meat-and-potatoes, or rice-and-beans if you will. My father was born here, but my grandfather emigrated from Acapulco and settled in Tijuana. He was a short, dark-skinned man. My father's mother was born in Los Angeles and her family has been there for as long as she can remember. My white side is an intermingling of French, English and the obligatory American Indian drop (an interesting talk would be to discuss the possible reasons so many groups claim indigenous blood), however every person on my white side has married, or is married, to a person of Mexican descent. So both sides of my family are mixed and matched with all sorts of ethnicities. This led to a childhood that was fairly pluralistic. I was always

around brown, black or white people. I understood very early the registers of various languages that the different cultures adopted. I became sensitive to them, which would help me later as a poet.

In particular, I became able to code switch. At home, it was necessary for me to speak correct English. Slang was permitted only in increments, especially as I began to drift towards gangs. When we would visit family I would have to follow the Spanish and reply. With my friends, we spoke in a language that most kids become familiar with, a language that excludes the uninitiated. All forms of jargon, and slang is a form of jargon, are used to exclude outsiders. It also shows membership within a group. Doctors use Latin to name diseases. Besides it being a language of power (Latin sounds like a magical spell—that's why the Catholic church uses it), it keeps the patient unaware of the true ramifications of the diagnosis, and calmer. Now this might be a simplification of jargon. However, this is by analogy a point that I can make to exemplify the power I felt when using slang. It showed my dexterity with language to some, baffled others, and wooed still others. Powerful stuff, words. These sensitivities to different types of registers of language, styles of speaking within these registers, and each style's independent kind of syntax and diction helped me as a poet. Juxtaposing these various gradations of language began to lend

complexity to my voice, and, more importantly, this juxtaposing represented myself more accurately. This switching of registers and codes and dialects is now more representative of speech patterns in our information-free-for-all era. No matter where you live, you have an idea what others sound like.

RQ: My sisters and I grew up in Southeast Los Angeles, in the city of Bell. It was predominantly a Mexican neighborhood. I remember always being identified as Mexican—it felt like my family's Costa Rican origin was being absorbed by the dominant Chicano culture. It didn't matter that we spoke a different type of Spanish, or that we had different customs and traditions. When it comes to poetry and writing, the Chicano literary movement has prevailed since the 1960s. This incredibly important movement created a space for writers like me, but when I started writing in the 1990s it didn't account for the diversity amid Latin American cultures.

During my time as a student, I read many Chicano poets, for example Gary Soto, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Alberto Ríos and Luis Omar Salinas. I felt a connection to their poetry of place and family. I learned about language and narrative style from their poetry. These men had something important to say about their lives. They wrote with clarity and precision of imagery. But where were the other Latina/os like me?

These Chicano poets were the models I had, but I wanted to be more Stevens than Soto. I wasn't Chicano and I didn't see myself in their subjective narratives. I wrote narrative poems about my cultural experiences, and this influence is reflected in my first collection of poetry, *Next Extinct Mammal*. But in time and with a burgeoning awareness of other Latinos like me, I started to move away from narrative subjectivity—to look beyond myself, to focus on bigger questions about our humanity.

DTM: I see similarities in our upbringing, but also radical differences that shaped the people we have become today. For instance, you seemed to always want to create, bring beauty or truth or whatever gift you could share with others. On the other hand, while I care about creating something beautiful, something I can give to the reader, I am seeking a more reciprocal relationship with the world. I got interested in poetry because people said I was good, just as much as me just enjoying poetry. You can't put as much time into something as I have poetry and not love it—however, I know part of the reason I stuck with poetry is because I am competitive. I wanted to be better than people in my workshop, in my program, in the books I read, in the anthologies I bought. I have had to struggle with my competitive nature, and furthering my education has

helped exponentially. This competitive streak was much more accommodating when I was gangbanging than it has been in the classroom (don't let people tell you any different: careerism may work for a bit but is, I believe, for a myriad of reasons, unsustainable).

I used my competitive nature, and general hunger in most aspects of my life, as motivation, reasons to continue arduous and often unheralded work alone. This competitive nature that pushes me to work hard is accompanied by and supported by a desire to stand out, to be unique, which I would assume most artists have to varying degrees. Initially, this desire to be unique made being the only Latina/o, or one of two, easier. The novelty of being a pet quickly passed. Though the novelty of being "hood inside the walls of the academy" hasn't completely passed, I am much more comfortable with being a part of academia now, and I better be. It is the only way to thank the Latina/os that paved the way—to not waste their work.

RQ: Having a competitive attitude is often necessary for motivation. I agree and admire your view on being competitive. You say that you're not sure how you got into the academy. People took an interest in you and your work and in this way we are very similar. But unlike you, it has taken me some time to find comfort within the walls of academia. Having grown up in Los

Angeles, a city whose populace is primarily people of color, my adjustment to the Midwest was/is somewhat challenging. Academic institutions in the most populated cities in America, or those along its coast, are more diverse. An examination of these English departments will reveal an assortment of people of color, and in many cases they are the dominant faculty. The move away from a majority of white faculty in English departments has yet to reach the Midwest. I find myself as one among five people of color in my department—this might speak more to the community than to the institution itself.

Recently, a new literary festival was announced in my neighborhood. This festival is sponsored by businesses and the local literary magazine housed at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Its organizers are creative-writing degree holders. Yet, with all their education and experience within the literary community, they've failed to introduce our neighborhood to Asian, Latina/o, Native American and LGBT writers of any sort. The literary festival's self-proclaimed purpose is to provide the community with "a more diverse and enriching cultural experience" through literature. The line-up of 15 writers includes three black writers, and the rest are straight, white writers. It's this type of academic-sponsored activity that makes it difficult for people of

color to feel comfortable in academia outside of coastal institutions. This is where I find myself.

DTM: I find your answer very interesting. I think that is unfortunate to have a literary festival promoting itself on plurality and to glaringly lack any true plurality. However, I think that lack of plurality points to the fact that Latina/os have been historically underrepresented in the media. In places like Southern California, where we come from, the community can seem pervasive but invisible outside of our own barrios. One of the things I think that has helped me is my appearance. I'm not referring to how ravishingly handsome I am, but that I am thin, 6'1" and have features that are not often considered "indio." In the Latina/o community, as well as many others, I would argue, people suffer from "white is right" syndrome. For instance, when I go and visit my tias in Tijuana, they always make a big deal about my physical appearance, and say I look like a novela star. While it makes me feel good, I know that it is just representative of a larger problem within the community. Not that I feel I can pass, because I don't think I can, but I truly do believe that if I had more of an indio-looking appearance, my experiences would be completely different.

Another thing that helps me is that I am a man. People react to my personality and me in a specific way because

I am a man. I know this. I am also straight, so that helps. I bring these things up because I feel it is just as important to know where you have places of privilege as where you may suffer from social constraints. No one is completely oppressed or fully privileged in this society. We all have some commonalities if we look hard enough. And ultimately, that is what I want, a more honest, balanced society. Utopian, I know, but an idea I try to give to my undergraduates and to the readers of my work. If I can open the conversation up a little, I did my job.

RBO: What would you like to see from Latina/os in the literary/academic field?

DTM: I would like to see more Latina/os in every field, especially my own, obviously. For that to happen, for better or for worse, Latina/os must be well-versed in the canon. For example, many consider jazz an improvisational music, and it is, but these are musicians who studied classical forms of music and worked on the fundamentals of their craft, to supplement their improvisational skills. The same can be said for basketball. I don't see any street ballers in the NBA, because they have no fundamentals (and all of their flashy moves would be called travelling or palming). The same goes for writing. Understanding the history of poetry, and studying what the great writers have

written prior, not just the contemporary writers you like, is fundamental to being able to write with force. Nobody is born buff—they work on it. For that reason MFA programs, as much as they are chastised for being scams, make it easier to build a poetic foundation.

I don't think a writer with an MFA, or a PhD now, is necessarily better than one without a degree. However, I do think that it helps to cultivate talent, and places a writer in the direction of other writers, and I would not have been able to reach my potential without my MFA at San Diego State University and my PhD at the University of Houston. I did, though, have to make hard decisions and let go of many things I wanted in order to become a writer. Fortunately, many of the goals that I set for myself are beginning to come to fruition (as far as my writing goals—many personal goals are still far off). But the truth is, all of this would have been worth it anyway, because I enjoy what I do. There is always the thrill of the hunt for a new poem. That being said, what I want for the Latina/o writing community is what anyone wants for their brothers and sisters: happiness. This is how I found my happiness, and this route might lead to that happiness for others.

On a side note, Thank you Ruben, Rosebud and *The Conversant*. This also make me happy. As does a cold Tecate.

RQ: I'd like to see more Latina/os in public spaces, in print, in academic positions. A lack of their presence leaves too much room for bigotry. Latina/os must change the existing white, patriarchal, hetero-normative system that suffuses institutions in America. At a conference I attended in 2009, Ilan Stavans spoke of a Latino student in his class struggling to keep up with the work. Stavans urged the student to work harder or to drop out. This response upset me. I understand that higher education isn't for everyone. I remember my own challenges to stay in college instead of working full-time to help my mother and sisters pay the rent, my struggle to learn how to study, how to navigate course work as a first-generation college student. Latina/os must make a space for themselves in the academy.

The academy serves as an analog to the tradition of American poetry. We must be aware that these institutions were not created for us. We see it in the number of Latina/o poets not in the canon of American letters. We see it in the small number of Latina/os appearing in literary magazines. We see it in the limited number of organizations that serve to create and cultivate Latin American poetry.

More than 40 years after the Chicana/o literary movement, we have the first Latino poet winning

The Yale Younger Poets prize. Latina/os need to learn about the history of Latina/o poetry within the American tradition. Look back at the poets who have come before you. Know where you stand amid the American landscapes and find your place within it, then write. Write against it. Write alongside it. But write with clarity and purpose. If you're going to speak, speak well. If you're going to write, write well. Say something important. The last thing we need is for Latina/o poets to blur into the portrait of conceptualism sweeping through contemporary poetry. Don't get washed out into the tide of language that doesn't give you a hand at rising to the top.

In the last few years, I've come to find poets that reach through and beyond their own personal experience to speak with clarity about being in the world. Poets like Carmen Giménez Smith, Tomás Q. Morín, Cynthia Cruz and Laurie Ann Guerrero (to name a few), who have proven to me that Latina/os have important things to say about universal truths of life, such as death, suffering and love—the truths of our humanity. It was Horace who reminded us that what is written in poems will be developed from what is known. So that anyone might suppose himself capable of the same. It is these contemporary poets who resist or evade the pressure of their moment in time, to provide readers with a vision that is a broader, seemingly objective view of the world for all to experience. This is what I would like to see.

MILLICENT BORGES ACCARDI AND AMY SAYRE BAPTISTA

Rosebud Ben-Oni: Both of you were in Portugal in July. Did you plan to be there at the same time? What was the occasion?

Millicent Borges Accardi: Amy and I were in Lisbon for the Neither Here nor There, Yet Both conference, for a panel entitled "Narratives of Those Who Left and Those Who Stayed Behind," and also a reading: "A World of Possibility: Portuguese-American Authors Perspectives on Writing and Life."

How we got there was that last spring, at the Massachusetts Poetry Festival in Salem, Amy and I decided to travel to Porto for Portuguese language classes since we were both woefully behind in learning our mother tongue. I was still at the *Sim! Sim! Bon dia stage*. Acquiring a language builds that way, word by word.

Amy Sayre Baptista: I stayed in Portugal for a little over five weeks, to complete three weeks at Vivap Sala de Explicaçoes in Porto, and to do research for a poetry manuscript in Alcobaça. Antonio Lobos Antunes said once during an interview that reading a translation is like viewing a black-and-white photo of a color image. Taking the immersion class was the reverse; suddenly with Portuguese everything was vivid. It was like Dorothy stepping into Oz. Even though I did not quite gain fluency, I realized that I could. By the same token, you also realize the distance that you will always have from a language that was your second, or in our case, a simultaneous language that was withheld or given to you in small doses like a sweet. In Porto, the first time someone addressed me in Portuguese on the street, and I responded without thinking, that was epic. But cultural references and idioms keep linguistic intimacy at bay.

Growing up Portuguese-American was not always seen as a positive in the Midwestern town where I was born. That identity separated you. Like my sister Lori said, you didn't draw attention to yourself; the idea was to blend. Assimilation was the goal. So like many descendants of immigrants, we learned rare phrases, swear words, and, oddly enough, we retained an accent that replicated the region from which our people hailed. And what became clear to me was the definitive sense of Cá and

Lá, of being neither Portuguese nor American, but in the twilight of both. By the time I left Portugal, I found myself at a loss for English words, as I was seeking the Portuguese first, and once, without thinking, turned to a friend from Porto and said, "How do you say that in English?"

MBA: Growing up, my experience with Portuguese was similar, even though it was my father's first language. He did not speak English until he went to school. Abandoned by his widowed father, he was raised by his maternal grandmother and her sister, who had been handicapped by polio. He used to joke that they chased him under the bed with a broom when he was naughty. Even though they lived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, they did not speak English and relied on family members to translate newspapers and labels, a duty my father took over as soon as he learned how to read. I remember songs and fights, and when family said things they did not want me to understand, it was in Portuguese—a language I was intensely curious about. My dad was also an altar boy for masses delivered in Portuguese at, I think, St. John the Baptist, a church which just closed in 2013 after 150 years.

To get back to it: my experiences with Portuguese were secret conversations, songs and swear words, so, of course, as a kid, this would be attractive. Plus, I always

felt something was missing, like a person who had lost a leg but still itched with a phantom limb. Like there was something about me that was missing. Perhaps if my family had stayed in New Bedford instead of moving to California, I would have had more of an experience of the language.

However, in Southern California, American culture was drummed into me like multiplication tables: everyone seemed nervous when I asked questions, except the few times a year when we went to Portuguese picnics or bloodless bullfights in Artesia.

In class in Porto, sometimes I wanted to cry out of happiness. Other times out of frustration. Regaining a mother tongue is more than learning a "new" language. It is a rebirth. I wondered if I would be a different person if my narrative were in Portuguese. I had felt at home living in France, and I learned in class that on the Azorean Island of Terceira (where my family is from) people speak with a French accent. Our teacher Leila is from Brazil and, instantaneously, she was easier to understand than those in Lisbon. Her accent seems closer to Spanish and she meticulously copies everything she says on the board. Closer to Spanish, meaning I was able to recognize words shared between Portuguese and Spanish. European Portuguese looks the same as Brazilian, but it is pronounced very differently.

Returning to L.A., I had connecting flights (16-hour trip), and I watched a Bruce Willis movie in Portuguese, then *Two Broke Girls* with Portuguese subtitles, feeling weirdly in between worlds. Neither here nor there. Me, part-way between the shore and a boat—a foot in each as the boat drifted away. I needed to make a decision whether to jump back, forward, or land in the sea. Which is home? I found it difficult not to sing out "*Ola*" and "*Obrigada*" as I journeyed back to Los Angeles. Those two words had become automatic. It took a few days not to yell "*Obrigada!*" I felt disorientated in customs, struggling to find my U.S. passport, so I can only imagine how Amy might feel after an additional three weeks in Porto!

One word that sticks in my mind is "*sujo.*" Two little girls (students of our instructor) kept chanting "*sujo.*" "*Sujo*," they bellowed out on a walk to the beach. "*Sujo*" when we cut through a large public park where there were crowds of children playing in muddy aqueducts and fountains. *Sujo.* Dirty. And on the bus, perhaps the first a-ha moment I had was when I saw the sign "*parar*" and it snapped inside me, "Yes! Stop!"

RBO: Amy, you and I had a similar feeling of identifying with Porto more than Lisbon. Do you know why this was true for you?

ASB: Part of that for me is recognizing my family in the working class people of the city. Porto is the hardest-working city I have ever visited, and after using the city bus system, where we both learned the term "*mal conductor*" (bad driver) from the elderly ladies that frequent this transportation, you come to appreciate the pathways of people on their way, and the dependence on one another to get there. If you want to learn about Porto, you need to ride the city buses and listen to the Donas. I have a theory that these ladies run the whole city in secret. Try to mind your business, and soon enough you become included in their comments. A carefully placed "*Nao me diga*" and a nod will gain more than you might expect, or certainly more than you can answer.

Stories shared of sons who do not come home enough, daughters that should be married, and husbands lost. Yet, the Donas remain stalwart. They turn the conversation on a dime to a recipe, the insufferable driving of buses, or the lateness of buses. If you are not happy with the place where you stay, ask one of these ladies. They will pause a second and say, "*Conheço um lugar. Dizer-lhes Dona Eusébia lhe enviou.*" I know a place. Tell them Dona Eusébia sent you. Dona Eusebia and her city sisters have saved more than one young bride from the infestation of rats, the battle with swollen ankles, and men—the latter being an on-going battle.

Mulheres invicta! The Donas, like the unconquered city, will never accept defeat.

The women of Porto do not have an easy way to go. They are tenacious, and carry their concerns in the lines of their foreheads and cheeks, but they are resilient. Beyond poetic notions of *saudade*, they face life with a fierce endurance that redefines *força*.

Porto was perhaps rougher on the edges than Lisbon but infinitely more welcoming, and in its many districts and ethnicities offered a complexity that was an explorer's delight. Between the bus and the train station, just a few streets from a quintessential Portuguese bakery and multiple cafés selling Port and *Francesinha* sandwiches, you turn the corner and find a Halal butcher. And the deep blue nights, the echo of seagulls' lament against the white stone squares—these images are simultaneous now with the name Porto. The blending of sorrow and beauty invoked in the gaivotes cry is the city's voice.

Being a traveler is sometimes like reading a great book, where you are swept up in a kind of rootless intimacy of the moment. You are contextualizing so many sensations so fast, then something jars you and you realize you are experiencing hospitality, not home. You look a great deal and are looked at without really being seen. There

is a constant transference from being subject to object and back.

I wrote my first poem in Portuguese on one of those nights. The assignment was to use only words I knew without referencing the dictionary, so forgive the stanza's elemental quality, but these lines are an artifact of my learning the language and of those moments of gliding consciousness that I'm still trying to unravel.

Sob o olhar dos homens com os olhos que me seguem gosta de gatos famintos
Eu uso o silêncio em volta dos meus ombros, como um vestido cair
Até a minha volta está nu para a noite.

A noite, abraçada pelo vento salgado
Obrigada por me ensinar a te esquecer.

Under the gaze of men with eyes that follow me like hungry cats
I wear your silence around my shoulders like a falling dress
Until my back is naked to the night.

Tonight, embraced by the salted wind
Thank you for teaching me to forget you.

RBO: Millicent, did you have a sense of that tug of war between being subject and object, and did it come through in the poetry you wrote while in Porto?

MBA: Poems I wrote started with questions: What is fair? Can I get lost? People in Porto are comfortable in their own skins, including the abrupt fishmonger wife who scrapes sardinas' scales onto the pavement every morning as we walk past the market. Not quick to smile, but quick to join in. There is an underlying sense of belonging. A history of place. People have it difficult, yet persist. There is a roughness to the cobblestones that are uneven to navigate in high heels, challenges living close to and making a living from the water. Our teacher mentioned the overt racism. It was not uncommon to hear from Portuguese that all Brazilian women are prostitutes, or from Brazilians that landlords won't rent to families once they hear the "*Ja*" of their accent.

Here are a few lines from my poem "Only More So," about a woman's reaction to soldiers demanding to quarter in her home:

You see it was all so simple:
they wanted the smooth golden of her neck,
the warm nest of her skirt;

her loss shifting like daggers beneath their skin.

As wind fragmented, as doors burned,
as fires latched, the last woman, this last
woman, clasped a bowl to her chest knowing,
knowing,
what the snow outside pretended, knowing
that nothing important ever belonged to her.

That now she must survive by owning air,
holding back the red, the full, the bare,
the proud canvases of flat language paper
that once told her everything she needed
to know.

It was like this, only more so.

Porto is often forgotten by the sunseekers of August. But Porto doesn't care; this is a working city and, like a finely tuned watch, it clicks moments away. Although touted as a Top Ten European Destination, Porto has another story behind the shiny exterior: its alleys filled with feral cats and seagulls, rundown town squares, cheap tascas, sausage and cheese markets filled with flies. Behind the scenes is austerity, politicians' posters urging citizens to "lower your expectations" and "live within your possibilities."

Economic austerity drives this city with its urban decay and shared housing, multiple families living together, its ancient Roman neighborhoods left to dance a slow decay, a rumba of wild nature and weeds. Shopkeepers running bare-bones operations often ask if you have the correct amount (because they do not have enough money in the cash register to make change), and, if you need a taxi, drivers will let you know if the fare is "far enough" to make it worth their while.

On Bon Jardim (good garden), where our hostel was, a third of the houses are abandoned, with aging "For Sale" signs and ornate iron gates overtaken by purple Cleopatra's Tears and sunflowers. Once grand properties remained unsold for decades. Along the River Douro, empty houses with their open-eyed windows bleed red graffiti.

We met a young filmmaker, Nuno Soares, who expressed his fear that the historic buildings of the city would fall to ruin for lack of care. He had just finished college and there were no jobs in Porto. He said he may look for work in the EU or the United States. He loves his city but also fears for it. Our first day in Porto, he took us on a walking tour to see the famous Livaria Lello & Irmaô bookstore that is, among other things, the inspiration for Harry Potter's Flourish & Blott Bookstore (and some scenes were allegedly shot there).

Nuno says he is "in love with the centenary architecture, the people…it is hard to find greater people…simple working-class…Porto, with its Douro River. Unfortunately, the downtown is facing a huge abandonment, which makes me grieve. I'm concerned about the preservation of what makes this city magical, and it may disappear soon if nobody does anything."

Amy, we both noticed that there were very few females in the cafes. Women in Porto seem split between two distinct groups: young ingénues (in their twenties) and black-clothed Donas, or widows in black veils. We asked, "Where are the women in their thirties and forties? Have they given up, sucked into the mothering identity of raising children without a public life?"

RBO: Amy, how do you think women's identities are attached to society's expectations?

ASB: Your question made me think of Salazar's *Estado Novo* and the 1933 constitution, which claimed that everyone was equal, "except for women, the difference resulting from their nature and for the good of the family," and required women to have fulfilled secondary education to vote while men needed only be able to read and write. In theory, women in Portugal secured full legal equality with the revolution of 1976, but I think

culture and custom still hold them back and are aided by a failing economy.

How is it that every young person in Portugal is entitled to a university degree, but the majority of female graduates are invisible in the public sphere? The rare woman in her thirties or forties that you see working is usually keeping a shop, or maybe you catch a glimpse of her in a restaurant kitchen. You can't blame this absence simply on tough economic times.

Portugal is filled with tough, tough women who thrive—the fishing wives of Nazaré, for example. Those ladies give new dimension to the word "hustle." But again, looking beneath the surface, Portuguese women wink with one eye and cry with the other. Recently divorced, I recognized the stress in other women that I might have previously overlooked. I understand how quickly abandonment can lead to homelessness, and the absolute terror that creates. When every string of security is cut in a matter of days, you learn to recognize the shipwrecked look in others. You've seen it in your own mirror.

After my husband left and so much was at stake for me, I started getting up and writing every morning from 4 a.m. to 7 a.m. I felt like no matter what else happened, I could control that—I could own those hours and

do something that was only for me. After arriving in Portugal, I started waking up at 4 a.m. again. At first I thought it was jet lag, but it persisted the entire trip. One of those mornings I wrote, "survival is just a heart that won't stop beating." That's a story written in the city stones, a story the river repeats, and the tide echoes. Survival is a Porto story. Maybe the real reason I came here after all.

We never talked about this while we were there, but I want to know how you felt about being asked why neither of us had children?

MBA: My answers have changed through the years. In my twenties, other women smiled, "Oh you'll change your mind!" or "Children are a blessing." Later, I heard, "Why didn't you ever?" But I didn't. One of my friends at 43 had a baby. She is miserable. She feels like her life is lost. I think if someone spends half a lifetime not wanting children, it is not a good idea at the last moment to cave in when you don't feel it in your heart.

As for me, I was the only child of an only child, in a household of adults (parents and grandparents). My world never included children.

My grandmother, Margo, a telephone operator, used to say she compromised and only had one, which in her

generation was odd. Yet she readily admits to having been not the most conscientious mother. Everyone laughed about it, but it was true. She would forget teacher meetings because she was at a political rally, or half-heartedly buy presents—never enjoying the process of mothering.

Then there was my own mother, who was conscientious, and took mothering to a new level of greatness, following the views of Doctor Spock's baby books. However, she drummed it into me that I should never "grow up" to be only a housewife or somebody's secretary. I was her great second-life hope. In school, I took metal shop instead of home economics. I played on the boy's softball team. I went to college.

Books and writing, those are my calling! My purposes in life. Looking back, I guess I never felt as if I wanted a replacement or a mini-me, nor did I catch baby fever. It just wasn't in me.

ASB: I know what you mean. Some women see babies and it sets off a craving in them for their own. I feel that way about puppies and airline tickets. That pretty much sums it up on my end. Being a woman without children does not equate to the absence of "mothering," which by definition is the ability "to give birth to." You can give birth to a great deal in your life: curiosity, poetry

and fierce love, to name a few. I have eight nieces. When the oldest was born, I came to understand love at first sight. Holding her in my arms was like trying to hold the sea in my heart. I understood the existence of a life I would put before my own. That moment humbled me, and it still does. I have eight nieces: Emily, Sarah, Kendi, Seely, Madeira, Kira, Corynne and Ava. When all else fails in this world, their names spoken aloud is hope. My sacred prayer. If that is all I ever know of mothering, I am deeply grateful, and my soul satisfied.

MARCELO HERNANDEZ CASTILLO AND DARREL ALEJANDRO HOLNES

PREFACE

—Marcelo Hernandez Castillo

Darrel Alejandro Holnes and I set out to participate in a discourse that outlines some of our aesthetic interests and similarities and, perhaps, to bridge some of the points of variation through which Latina/o poetry seems to intersect. Eventually, I proposed to reconsider the connotations around the terms "discourse" and "conversation." I wanted to experiment with the limits of what we can call a conversation, so I proposed to Darrel that we enter into a type of discourse that offers both a lyrical associative gesture and an exercise in collaboration. Terrance Hayes has translated a formal structure of presentation called a Pecha Kucha (from the re-appropriated Japanese word for "picture") into a poetic form in his book, *Lighthead*. The form derives from architecture students fed up with having to sit

through PowerPoint presentations for hours. In effect, they devised a new form: 20 x 20. The presentation consists of 20 images that all must contribute to the advancement of the overarching theme, and you have 20 seconds to talk about each one. Pecha Kuchas became a worldwide phenomenon, with people from different disciplines coming together to speak for 20 seconds about their specialty. "Pecha Kucha Nights," as Terrance explained to me, were a chance to construct interdisciplinary conversations through the medium of association.

Being poets, Darrel and I decided to write one Pecha Kucha as a conversation in lyric association. Each section approximates our appropriation of an image, and doesn't necessarily have to cohere with any other section, but must relate in one way or another to the overarching theme. We didn't see this merely as a collaboration in which he wrote one line, then I wrote the next. Rather, it's almost as if we react against each other or write to each other without acknowledging that the other is there. Perhaps, in the stream of all my sections, you could find something consistent, and vice versa with Darrel's.

For me, this form of conversation allows us to escape narrative and all of the temporal, spatial and dialectical limitations of having to move from A to B before you

can reach C. It's a way to claim a legitimate core, as with narrative, while also engaging in the disjointed and fractured nature of the lyric mode. This reminds me somewhat of Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*, where all the characters from both centuries appear on stage together but are oblivious of the other's existence even though they pick up the same props and move out of the way for each other. Each section of the Pecha Kucha, in a way, acts like a shadow of the next.

At first we didn't know what to expect, but as the "conversation" continued, we began to see impulses that pulled us every which way at the same time. We felt the urge to fight a narrative, or the urge to push for one—to negate the previous section, to further it, to jump into a different thread, to let it be anything that it wants. As with all experiments, ours didn't occur without its glitches, but we hope that this form, with practice and attention, will grow into a form of discourse that can challenge the way individuals transfer information.

PRAYER IN THE STYLE OF CORVETTES AND PIANOS

—A Pecha Kucha in lyric conversation between Darrel Alejandro Holnes and Marcelo Hernandez Castillo

Darrel Alejandro Holnes: [So if we listen past the sampled piano, drum kick and maracas, we'd still not hear life en vivo, chanclas beating the floor for misbehaving behind the speakerbox rumble.]

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo: [The music en vivo with its rags soaked in morning light—before anything else can touch it—is a transparent bell that keeps a single sound tethered to its body like smoke. The echo and its echo and its shape when nothing else is the same shape as you are.]

DAH: [She wears what the gringos call rags, but we say it is the closest any of us will ever get to Selena's bustiere—bedazzled in piedras zirconia—piedrera rocks the rocks to the ritmo's ton-ton and the knocky-knocks our abuelo said reminded him of home.]

MHC: [There are too many ways of saying this. Everyone is pretty and sick, but the pretty side of sick. No one is getting better, but at least everyone is pretty, which means that the artist is falling down, then getting up, then falling down again.]

DAH: [To call a girl dirty is to imply that any of us were ever clean, but that's the logic when you're someone else's precious, that others aren't or haven't always been as special as you. The statue's broken face covers the floor. The fragments are too fine to fit in my hands. One could never make a beach out of such fine sand; it'd all be whisked away on ocean breeze. What sort of heat rises from a crushed ceramic shoreline? Does a prayer-wave hit you like vapor during the summer fling you keep from your wife?]

MHC: [Praise the broken face, then sin for it. Logic is in someone else's mind beating its thumb against the floor. Praise the fragments that echo the sand in the ocean. Praise the sound of the smoke raking through the throats of a good time. Praise the girl that covers the floor with her footprints. Praise the ritual that water and sand make when everything but smoke can rise.]

DAH: [Weep for the woman cloaked in darkness. Weep for the shame of shadow-casters and of night. Weep

for the light and all its beaming privilege. Weep and baptize your daughter in these tears. Soon she will be both her own and someone else's woman, the way we are all born alone into this world but pass through it a part of so many other lives. Weep for rivers you'll create and never see reach the ocean in your lifetime. Weep, on your knees, until the boys can't call you dirty anymore.]

MHC: [The knots of prayers in your hands are either a shadow or a dream. And if dream, so solid, so cold as the thickness of glass. You were washing the river out of your hair like a flame pulling smoke from a wick. Nothing changed. The creamy boys who are virgins most of the time are calling like winter from a shallow puddle.]

DAH: [Men too worship my seasons. Rainy and dry are no one else's. Keep the summer's humidity and the winter's subzero cold but never take the spring; it's the one white thing worth crossing the border for. She lies autumn at your feet, and you lay her body upon a stage. Open the curtains, fill her belly button with beer, take a shot, and watch her disappear.]

MHC: [Sometimes I don't know what to do with my hands and you undress me knot by knot until there's just a pretty bow of me left. Until the curtains of my bones

are dressed over my arms. How long before there's nothing left of me?]

DAH: [Dexterity is my vice. And I haven't been to church in a while. Perhaps on the Day of the Dead my hands will rise to heaven. The room as bright as the sun shining through it.]

MHC: [In church you can lick the sun like a mango, and tell me I'm pretty as sin.]

DAH: [Hold me like the other hand in prayer. And open your mouth.]

MHC: [The night is coiled around the edges of your name in my mouth, as if it's too late to take it back, as if it's shaking itself into a stutter of flesh.]

DAH: [I am not at a loss for words, only no longer in need of any others than your name.]

MHC: [My name is tied to the other end of my body where you can hold it up to the thin light and breath into it.]

DAH: [A red balloon tied by a string to the roof of a corvette heads south for the winter.]

MHC: [Cheap red lipstick through a dirty rear-view mirror. The way you look at me when we are going nowhere.]

DAH: [My foot on the pedal. The radio left on.]

MHC: [The sun is barely contained in its own reflection as we rush to untangle the small circles of awe left by a name unsaid.]

AFTERWORD

—Celeste Guzmán Mendoza

Inspired by the culturally rooted visions of Cave Canem and Kundiman, CantoMundo has sought to create a space where Latina/o poets can nurture and enhance their poetics, lecture and learn about aspects of Latina/o poetics currently not discussed by mainstream poetry publishers and critics, and network with peer poets to enrich and further disseminate Latina/o poetry.

The founders (Norma E. Cantú, Pablo Miguel Martínez, Celeste Guzmán Mendoza, Deborah Paredez and Carmen Tafolla) created CantoMundo in response to our own need for a space where Latina/o poets could convene to celebrate and nurture our poetry regardless of our differences in language, country of origin, Latinidad, preferred genre, sexuality or age.

In four years, the CantoMundo workshop has hosted more than 50 poets in a creative and welcoming space,

providing time for inspiration and the work of writing poetry.

We pride ourselves on the workshop being inclusive of various forms of poetry. We value providing an affirming critical space where these forms can live and breathe alongside one another. This synergy does not occur in the mainstream workshop, where one can choose the class on spoken word or on the lyric poem or another form. At CantoMundo it is not about these divisions or classifications but about the conversations among them.

In addition to these conversations, CantoMundistas explore various themes in our writing (is the "*abuela*" poem a Latina/o trope?), in our language (do we write in Spanish? English? Portuguese? indigenous Latin American languages?), in the variances that our work embodies (what really is the difference and the politics of that difference between spoken-word and formal poetry?) and our training (does the MFA narrow or affirm our voice?).

The purpose of CantoMundo is not to answer any of these questions, nor to create a single manifesto on Latina/o poetics, but to provide a space where we can talk about our diverse and differing poetics sin pelos en la lengua—without fearing judgment by one another

or the mainstream poetry industry. We encourage such conversations to occur outside the workshop as well, which is evident in the three talks that comprise this chapbook. They take on a life of their own and work to define Latina/o poetics from the inside out, even while they break down definitions that have historically been imposed on us and our work (not just by the mainstream but by our own community). We believe it is important that Latina/o poets lead this conversation about our poetics and that we respect the varying styles that form the discussion.

In order to extend such discussions about Latina/o poetics, we encourage CantoMundistas to organize readings in their own region that feature fellow CantoMundistas. These events work to further the showcasing of the diversity of Latina/o poetry in this country.

AUTHOR BIOS

ROSEBUD BEN-ONI

Born to a Mexican mother and Jewish father, **Rosebud Ben-Oni** is a CantoMundo Fellow and the author of *SOLECISM*. She was a Rackham Merit Fellow at the University of Michigan, where she earned her MFA in poetry, and a Horace Goldsmith Scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Ben-Oni is an editorial advisor for VIDA: Women in Literary Arts.

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Millicent Borges Accardi is the author of three poetry collections: *Injuring Eternity*, *Only More So* (forthcoming) and the chapbook *Woman on a Shaky Bridge* (Finishing Line Press). She has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, the Barbara Deming Foundation, CantoMundo and Formby at Texas Tech. Millicent received degrees in English and writing from Cal State University Long Beach, holds a Masters in Professional Writing from the University of Southern California, and works as a freelance writer.

CELESTE GUZMÁN MENDOZA

(original photo by Mari Correa)

Celeste Guzmán Mendoza, born and raised in San Antonio, writes poetry, plays and essays. Her first full-length poetry manuscript, *Beneath the Halo*, was published by Wings Press in September 2013. Her second book, *Coming in Waves*, is forthcoming in 2015. Guzmán Mendoza is co-director and a co-founder of CantoMundo, a workshop for Latina/o poets. Her poetry and essays have been published in the following anthologies: *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education*, *Telling Tongues: A Latin@ Anthology on Language Experience*, *Red Boots and Attitude: The Spirit of Texas Women Writers*, *¡Floricanto Sí!: U.S. Latina Poetry* and *This Promiscuous Light*.

MARCELO HERNANDEZ CASTILLO

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo was born in Zacatecas, Mexico, and is a CantoMundo fellow, a Zell post-graduate fellow and the first undocumented student to graduate from the University of Michigan's MFA program. He is a Pushcart nominee and has received fellowships to attend the Squaw Valley Writer's Workshop, The Atlantic Center for the Arts and the Vermont Studio Center.

DARREL ALEJANDRO HOLNES

Darrel Alejandro Holnes is from Panama City and the former Canal Zone of Panamá. He studied art at the Universidad del Arte Ganexa, music at the Instituto Nacional de Música and creative writing at the University of Houston and the University of Michigan, the latter from which he earned a Masters of Fine Arts degree. He is the co-author of *PRIME: Poetry & Conversations*. His plays have been recognized by the Kennedy Center, and read and produced in regional and university theaters throughout the U.S. He was a "waiter" at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, and is a Cave Canem, CantoMundo and VCFA fellow. He currently teaches at Rutgers University and New York University, consults for the United Nations, and writes and resides in New York.

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Amy Sayre Baptista has a fiction MFA from the University of Illinois. She was a 2010 Disquiet Fellowship recipient, and is presently finishing a novel and beginning a collection of short stories. She was a 2012 Pushcart Prize nominee in fiction.

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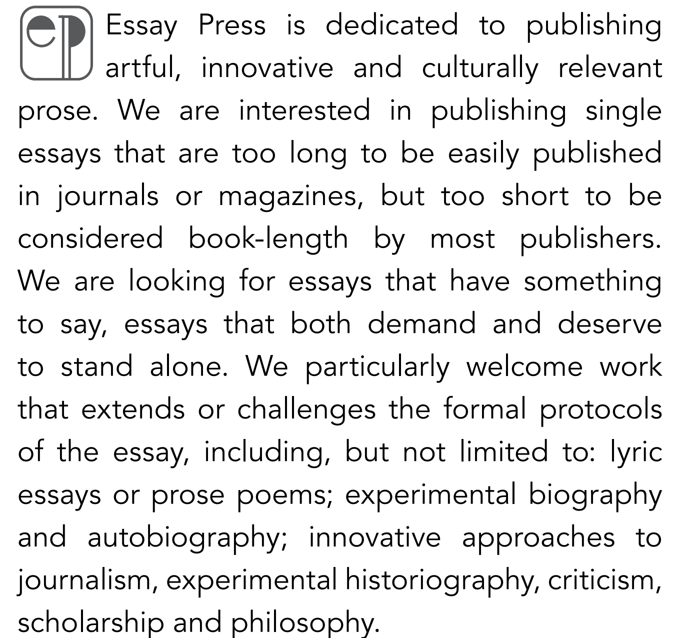

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