Abstract: In the following conversation, the poet Sean Frederick Forbes offers lenses to various cultures, diasporas, geographies, histories, and world languages that inform his poetics. His deep commitment to formalism and innovation through poetics provides a closer examination of gender, sexuality, and society, which all inform his vision for poetry and the world. Overall, history and the everyday fuel his poetry, which is the ultimate medium for witnessing and documenting lives of struggle and triumph. The conversation was conducted, via e-mail messages and telephone, beginning in winter of 2014 through summer of 2015.

Sean Frederick Forbes: was born in Heidelberg, Germany, and raised in Southside Jamaica, Queens, New York City. He is the author of Providencia: A Book of Poems (2013). Sean identifies as Afro-Latino and connects to the Afro-Caribbean diaspora. Sean studied English and Africana Studies at Queens College, The City University of New York, where he was an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow. He received his master’s and doctoral degrees in English from the University of Connecticut. In 2009, he received a Woodrow Wilson Mellon Mays University Fellows Travel and Research Grant for travel to Providencia, Colombia.

Recent poems have appeared in various journals including Chagrin River Review, Crab Orchard Review, Midwest Quarterly, and Sargasso: A Journal of Caribbean Literature, Language and Culture. His poems have been featured in various venues ranging from Poem-a-Day, sponsored by the Academy of American Poets, to WNPR with John Dankosky on a feature titled The Art and Power of Poetry.

Since 2013, Sean has been the poetry and nonfiction reader for
the journal *Westview* published by Southwestern Oklahoma State University. He serves on the Board of Directors of 2Leaf Press. Sean served as the associate director of Humanities House, a living and learning community, at the University of Connecticut during the 2013–2014 term. Currently, he teaches creative writing and poetry, serves as the interim director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Connecticut, and provides professional learning workshops in the public schools to advance creative writing and the arts.

**Rodrigo Joseph Rodríguez (RJR):** Family and geography shape your poetics as well as journeys with a sense of wandering and wonderment, too.

**Sean Frederick Forbes (SFF):** My maternal and paternal grandparents and my mother were born in Isla de Providencia or Old Providence, a mountainous Caribbean island part of the Colombian department of the Archipelago of San Andrés, Providencia and Santa Catalina. Providencia’s total landmass is roughly five miles with a current estimated population of 5,000. Many inhabitants claim West African, European, and of course mainland Colombian ancestry. It was the site of an English Puritan colony in 1629 established by the Providence Island Company and was briefly taken by Spain in 1641, and there have been major political battles between Nicaragua and Colombia over which nation has rightful ownership of the islands.

**RJR:** Your volume of poetry *Providencia* (2013) offers us foresight to bear witness of a place unmapped and in need of unearthing through voice and storytelling. In the preface to your book, the reader learns that since your youth you yearned to “engage in dialogue where there were silences, to tell good stories with dynamic characters and scenes and to try to find the truth” (ix). Tell me about these yearnings.

**SFF:** Recently, I had an e-mail exchange with my father. I asked him if I had any creative impulses as a child. (I think this is a question most writers and artists might ask their parents.) In any event, my father told me that I was sensitive and a tad withdrawn; that I was more of an observer and was prone to reading and writing.
Many of my yearnings were to engage in conversations—I was often shy—and to feel included because I always felt odd and out-of-place. The bedtime stories that were read to me and my grandparents’ memories and musings about the island of Providencia became places where I could actively engage with characters and feel accepted.

While my father was a platoon sergeant in the U.S. Army, I lived in Heidelberg, Germany, and Sierra Vista, Arizona. My parents separated when I was four.

In 1983, my mother and I began living in Southside Jamaica, Queens. My maternal grandparents, aunt, uncle, and mother raised me within a tight-knit family unit.

When my mother and I began living with my grandparents, I suddenly began to hear two new languages in their household: Spanish and their English-based patois. I was used to hearing English and German due to my father having been stationed in Germany and Arizona. I was most impressed and astonished with the patois and yearned to speak it fluently. Hence, I began my daily task of listening to the tone, inflection, and timbre of my grandparents’ native language.

At ten, I began to imitate my grandparents’ patois so well that they soon began to joke that I should have been born in Providencia, and rightfully so because it was in this language that I felt like I belonged. Indeed, I still belong, despite the fact that my ability to understand and speak the language might be labeled as simple affectation to some.

**RJR:** As a global citizen, many literatures and voices inform your poetics ranging from the sense of place to the power of voice and language. In the essay “Journey into Speech” (2008), Michelle Cliff writes, “To route this journey I must begin with origins, and the significance of these origins” (vii). Describe the origins that inform your work.

**SFF:** The late Philip Levine once wrote, “I keep writing about the ordinary because for me it’s the home of the extraordinary.” In my creative writing class, I often give my students a prose exercise in which they are to describe the sights and sounds of their neighbor-
hood. They often tell me that their lives are boring, that nothing extraordinary has happened to them; therefore, they explain they can’t write about their neighborhoods.

To describe the origins that inform my work, I gave myself the same assignment and soon discovered that there were many childhood neighbors who were so influential to my literary and creative upbringing. These were men and women from places like Barbados, Georgia, Haiti, North Carolina, Panama, and Virginia.

I think back to hot summer evenings on my grandparents’ front stoop where neighbors would stop by for iced tea and to have long conversations with us about community politics, sharing recipes, and lived experiences. I think, too, about my large extended family and languages spoken such as Arabic, Haitian Creole, Tagalog, and Urdu on a daily basis. These experiences, coupled with reading authors like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Derek Walcott, among others, were entryways into cultures and languages that continue to inform my poetry today.

RJR: In the poem “To the Diaspora,” Gwendolyn Brooks writes, “You did not know the Black continent / that had to be reached / was you” (499). Your poems reach inward and outward in a broader definition of diaspora similar to a question posed by Knight. He argues, “A diaspora community should be a recognized community but it should also represent a certain critical mass of individuals. […] Who exactly defines the diaspora and under what conditions does it cease to be recognized a diaspora?” (10). Are your poems these critical masses in our letters about the African Americas as a hemispheric, interconnected wholeness?

SFF: I believe my poems attempt to show that there are more diasporas, or scatterings, than many would like to think exist. The term itself does not belong exclusively to one group of people. While conducting research about the diverse ancestral origins of the islanders in Providencia, I discovered that many people are able to trace their ancestry to not only African countries, indigenous people of the Caribbean, mainland Colombia, but also to the Cayman Islands, England, Ireland, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Poland, and Scotland.

These scatterings are indeed unique but also very similar to many other immigrant populations throughout the world, especially in
the United States. Not only did I want to broaden the definition of “diaspora,” but I also wanted to bring to light the fact that for many people living in the Caribbean basin, Providencia remains, to some extent, a lesser-known island in cultural, geographic, historic and political terms.

RJR: Your poems on migration and those that question color hierarchies and the exotic remind me of The African Americas Project, which was founded by Persephone Braham, and the curator Julie McGee with the exhibit Keith Morrison: Middle Passage. Keith Morrison, who is Jamaica-born, examines and reimagines the Middle Passage. Tell us about the passages you encounter and document.

SFF: Throughout the text, my main concern was to show the different types of passages that one takes throughout life. There is the passage of entering into the interior, which has many representations such as entering into one’s internal thoughts, desires, and fears, and then entering one’s ancestral homeland as an outside while having some insider understanding of cultural and social norms. There is the passage one takes in terms of discovering historical facts and fictions. There is the passage that one of the speakers must take to climb to the top of the highest peak in Providencia at sunrise to claim himself anew. Moreover, there is the passage of acceptance as a gay male of mixed-race and the daily struggles one must face.

While I don’t directly reference the Middle Passage in the poems, it is embedded via images and references to slavery, piracy, and colonialism. In fact, subtle hints invite the readers to engage in their own passage of discovery.

RJR: In the first section of your book, we journey with you to Isla de Providencia, Colombia, located on the eastern coast of Nicaragua, and Queens, New York. The speakers communicate the narratives of those who came before them. Richard Blanco (2013) reminds us, “Every story begins inside a story that’s already begun by others. Long before we take our first breath, there’s a plot well under way with characters and a setting we did not choose but which were chosen for us” (6). Tell us about the chosen voices that find a home in your poetry.

SFF: I am a narrative poet. I like to tell stories, and the persona
poem is one that I find to be suitable in terms of this type of expression. I was inspired by Ai’s poetry as I was writing and revising these poems. I thought about character construction and the ways in which dramatic monologues expose one’s secret and inner desires and yearnings. What was of the utmost importance for me was not to silence or suppress the voices of characters.

The grandfather and father figures in the book are often depicted through their actions and most notably their absence and only have one dramatic monologue each. These are telling facts that reveal not only a lack of a fatherly presence in the male speaker’s life, but that marrow-deep connections and bonds are surprisingly still in place. There are numerous female voices from an oracle telling of Providencia’s formation, the grandmother’s prophecies, the mother’s fears and sorrows, and even the voices of inanimate objects that provide added layers of meaning and context.

All of these voices weren’t necessarily chosen, but instead were presented to me in ways that allowed me to experiment and complicate aspects of my craft.

RJR: The map you faced as second-grade student in 1987 was named THE WORLD, yet Providencia was missing in name and place. This absence could have meant that the birthplace and stories of your maternal and paternal grandparents and your mother were non-existent to the point of embellishment to mislead.

Consequently, you’ve described this as a defining, boyhood moment of panic, which led to disparaging name calling from your classmates that you “remained silent the rest of the day” (x). Can a map revered in an elementary classroom and the schooling one endures be challenged by poetry?

SFF: Simply put, maps are two-dimensional representations of the surface of the world. We expect maps to measure scale and accuracy, but what happens when not all maps or atlases are accurate as it was in my case? In her “biomythography” titled Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, Audre Lorde writes about being unable to find—one a world atlas—the Grenadian satellite island of Carriacou where her mother was born. It was a serious omission that eventually prompted her to write a comparative study for her degree in library sciences of atlases that did feature Carriacou. (Lorde men-
tions that she was in her late twenties by the time she was able to find it represented on an atlas).

After reading about Lorde’s troubles, I began to think of the ways in which lesser known histories and geographies are often not represented. One question that I asked myself as I was writing was: What does mainland Colombia mean to Providencia and vice versa? Indeed, this is a multi-layered question, since it has cultural, historical, political, economic, and geographic implications.

Overall, I wanted to write a poem that investigates the complexities and challenges of mapping time, space, history, and the ways in which the speaker unearths new terrain in the process. The nine-part poem “The Map to the Pirate’s Treasure Is Woven into the Women’s Hair” complicates one’s thinking about traditional, two-dimensional maps as a means to show there is always more beyond the surface.

RJR: In the poem “The Map” (1946), Elizabeth Bishop declares, “Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West” (5). Can it be that you’re doing this as well by connecting all cardinal directions and seeing us as a hemispheric, interconnected whole through language?

SFF: Yes, I think so. As I was writing this poem, in particular, I incorporated different voices, historical time periods, and different countries. What I discovered during these imaginative travels was that language was at the core of what I was trying to achieve in the poem. I had to allow the different speakers in the poem to communicate with each other on the page, to show that every voice and every existence depends upon the other.

While the speaker’s voice is presented three times in the poem, he knows that he is not the focal point of the conversation. The speaker has to allow the facts, histories, and voices to show him this interconnectedness.

RJR: In the opening poem “Gnosis,” the speaker survives a severe burn to his right arm at the age of four. As if he were Atlas himself, carrying celestial spheres of the world, he reveals, “My arm is a geography of scars” (5). The speaker comes of age as mapmaker and storykeeper in body and language. When he turns 18, however, the
speaker’s self-knowledge guides his journey:

[. . .] I began to tear
away all I knew: ideas, images,
facts as delicate as corn silk. My arm
warmed, my fingers swollen and red,
but the pen now steady in my hold.

The speaker awakens to a new world before him into adulthood.

**SFF:** The speaker does awaken to a new world, one that he wants to chart for himself. As a child and adolescent, he was an ardent observer. He listened as intently as he could to his elders. The moment he turns 18, he knows that he will begin to have his own positive and negative life experiences that will allow him to shape and reshape the stories and histories that were passed down to him by his grandparents. The acts of posing old and new questions, studying, imagining, reading, traveling, and writing are the main tools that he will need on his journey.

**RJR:** Interactions and encounters inform the speakers’ lives in your poems to reach intimacy. In *Geopolitics* (2015), Saul Bernard Cohen acknowledges, “Geography is the study of the features and patterns formed by the interaction of the natural and human-made environments” (4). Do geographies shape much more than these two environments?

**SFF:** I think so, because the speakers are actively engaged with imaginative geographies in many of the poems. Some of the speakers recount vivid tales of the island. For instance, they perform santería rituals, and they have erotic dreams about the god of thunder Shango. Many of these interactions allow the speakers to embrace different levels of intimacy with themselves and other speakers and allow them to understand that not every experience can be understood at face value.

**RJR:** In *The Trickster Figure in American Literature* (2013), Morgan notes, “Tricksters represent freedom from all restraint. They frequently astonish with their ability to achieve with creative breakthroughs. [. . .] Rather than worrying about banishment or fitting in, tricksters invite chaos.” Tell me about the trickster presence and shapeshifter voices that summon us in your poems.
SFF: Morgan’s comments about tricksters “invit[ing] chaos” are at the core of the aesthetics employed in the poems. Why would anyone want to invite chaos into one’s life? Chaos means disorder, confusion, randomness even. In Greek mythology, chaos means “the primal void” and in the Biblical usage it means “chasm” or “abyss.” The trickster is willing to cross boundaries, is not afraid of disorder, and looks at an abyss as an area of exploration and examination. These border crossings at first glance might appear to be merely disruptive behavior. Specifically, the term “disruptive” contains a negative connotation, one that suggests that the trickster only engages in behaviors with grave consequences for the status quo.

Tricksters are often represented as male in various mythologies. Yet while my poems are disruptive in ways that challenge social limitations, they open up a new space that allows the speaker to recreate his identity vis-à-vis his family and his society. My own trickster poems ask readers to understand disruption as a force for positive growth.

RJR: Lorde explains, “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (Byrd 39). What are the risks you’ve undertaken as a poet to voice your own canto hondo, or deep song?

SFF: There is one section of the book titled “Voz del Mano” or “the hand’s voice” in which many of the poems are homoerotic. The speakers in this section are honest and unapologetic about their sexuality and sexual experiences. When I was first writing these poems, I worried about some of the possible negative reactions of my parents and various family members, but I soon began to realize that expressing one’s self means that one has to be truthful. To paraphrase Lorde, she states that our silences will not protect us. This is an essential mantra I often remind myself when I begin writing a poem. I was 18 when I took my first creative writing workshop. I remember being terrified of form, so I wrote in free verse. It wasn’t until I was in graduate school that I began to write sonnets, villanelles, pantoums, and other forms. I once thought that these forms were too restrictive and would silence my canto hondo, but in reality they allowed me to use language in ways I wouldn’t have thought of before then.
RJR: In the preface, you describe yourself as a “mixed-race boy with light skin and ‘good hair’” (xii).

SFF: Yes, I was raised in Southside Jamaica, Queens, in a predominantly African American neighborhood of New York City. I was often singled out as the “light-skin kid with good hair.” I was often asked—in an overtly sexual way by older men in the neighborhood—if I had a light-skinned sister, because they were sure she had to be a dime-piece.

I was often asked, *What are you?* as in what was my racial and/or ethnic makeup. So I responded by saying, *I’m mixed,* which was what my grandparents and mother told me, but they were never specific about this mixture. I was always confused about our ethnic origins. Also, I learned that “mixed” was a word meant to evade further questioning, but I had the fire in me to start tracing our tangled family tree.

RJR: The reader learns that at the age of 10 you discovered your attraction to men. This realization appears in some of the poems.

SFF: Yes, this was a discovery that I had to hide for several years: I didn’t come out until I was 17. I remember hating myself for my attraction to boys my age. As mentioned above, I was often asked overtly sexual questions by older men and thought nothing of it at first. As I grew older, the whispers about me entered my ears in forms such as: *You’re pretty when you sleep, aren’t you?* or *You have almond-shaped eyes just like a girl.* I remember that I liked the attention, that I felt wanted in some odd way, that I was being validated.

Don’t get me wrong, these statements were harmful to my psyche and were borderline sexual harassment. Nonetheless, I was able to take the negative aspects of these experiences and make them positive by realizing that I can—and should be!—comfortable with my sexuality and selfhood.

RJR: How we identify and connect can be revealing about our unique selves as poets. How would you describe your identities and identifications in an age defined by origin?

SFF: I’d say that I identify as an American gay man of color, spe-
cifically Afro-Latino. As a child, I was told that I was mixed. As a teenager I began to say I was black. In my first few years of college, I began to tell people that I was Latino, Colombian in particular. Later on, I began to say I was Afro-Caribbean, which then led to a history and geography lesson about Providencia.

I am often told that I look “Blatino” a term meaning Black and Latino. I am often confused for Puerto Rican or Dominican, sometimes Egyptian or Israeli. My full name is equally confounding since it doesn’t sound Spanish like my parents’ names (Hermes Delano and Teresa Mercedes). Once, I was having an e-mail exchange with a Latino writer I wanted to invite to speak at the University of Connecticut. When we finally met in person, he was expecting a “white dude,” he explained, not a “brother.” There are many other scenarios that I could mention here, but the truth of the matter is that all that I have experienced is evidence of my diasporic family history. It is complex, layered, and vast.

**RJR:** In *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (2014), Mara Loveman reports, “States do not construct race out of nothing. Rather, states ‘make race’ by endowing particular axes of variation within a human population with symbolic weight and material consequences” (15).

**SFF:** When I traveled to Providencia in 2009, I kept hearing the word *panya* used quite often. This is a word used for those who are from mainland Colombia. One day, I was sitting on the front porch at an older cousin’s house drinking a bottle of Coca Cola and when she saw what I was drinking, she sucked her teeth and referred to it as *panya spit*. At first, I was unsure of what this term meant, I hadn’t realized the layered tensions between islanders and mainland Colombians.

As I began to conduct research, I discovered that even after the islands’ formal inclusion (Providencia, San Andrés, and Santa Catalina) in Colombia, the authorities neglected the needs of the islands by having only a handful of officials governing the small population. The islanders are entirely Raizals, an Afro-Caribbean group who speak both Spanish and English. Furthermore, the Hispanic culture, Spanish, and Roman Catholicism were understood as the key elements of Colombian identity, a movement which led many islanders to grow closer to an English-speaking, West Indian iden-
To be thought of as a *panya* to my older cousin was to deny one’s islander identity, a cost which she was not willing to spare.

**RJR:** In the poem “An Oracle Remembering Providencia’s Formation,” we learn about the origin of Providencia and the omnipotence of its coming to existence:

> The earth’s core spoke solemnly  
> that my fate was to be a tender  
> voice in the wind, that the land  
> would always feel my former  
> body’s pulse. I was to oversee  
> the hundreds of years of erosion  
> necessary to sculpt the figure  
> of a man’s head from the sea. (10)

**SFF:** The idea for this poem came to me as I was climbing Peak, the highest elevation point on the island of Providencia. I am afraid of heights; in fact, I didn’t quite make it to the top. It was a sunny day and windy at that elevation. I could see the entire island from this bird’s-eye view. All of the natural elements had a profound impact on me. Thus, I began to think about oracles as mentors and advisors, because in a way I was being guided by all that I was seeing, smelling, feeling, and hearing in that moment.

**RJR:** There is deity presence in the poem “An Oracle Remembering Providencia’s Formation” that the speaker possesses so much omnipotence in the beginning of time. The natural world is born by utterance and movement.

**SFF:** Yes, I think whenever one is conducting research about one’s ancestral homeland it is easy to become hypnotized by the literature, stories, and legends that people tell. At times, one fails to see the ways in which the natural world offers incredible lessons about these utterances and movements.

**RJR:** In *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Po*—
etry, Camille T. Dungy observes, “The nature poem occurs when an individual’s sense of the larger Earth enters into the world of human knowledge. The main understanding that results from this encounter is the Ecopoetic: that the world’s desires do not run the Earth, but the Earth does run the world” (4).

SFF: I was recently talking to Camille about the ecopoetic because when I first began to sketch ideas for poems about the island itself, I wasn’t sure if I could write them since I hadn’t yet traveled to Providencia. I was equipped with historical, cultural, political, and sociological knowledge about the island, stockpile photos of the beaches and people, stories and musings from my grandparents and parents, and my own thoughts and preconceived notions.

I thought I knew all there was to know, until I actually walked onto the tarmac at the small airport. Time stood still: I realized how little I knew about the flora and fauna, about the brilliant coral reef, and about the frigate or man-of-war birds that soared high above.

RJR: We travel from an island to urban areas and back to an actual island that even possesses a mythic, magical realism in the poems “Errand, 1949,” “Arrival in New York, 1961,” and “Haiku.” Tell us about the topographic and geographic journey through language.

SFF: The immigrant experience is one of movement, of journeys that are more than physical, but emotional and spiritual as well. In these three poems, I wanted to show the ways in which three generations of speakers adapt to their new surroundings amidst personal, social, and familial struggles. The line lengths in these poems are relatively short and so are the moments captured, but there are deeper tensions that are exposed in every word.

As a child, I thought that my grandparents’ journey to the United States was easy. (They had told me they took a plane, landed in New York City, and settled.) However, there’s more to emigration than the act of travel alone. I wanted to illustrate the different types of narratives that are untold.

RJR: Within a 15-minute period, anguish and violence appear in “Friday Evening” as we witness a boy physically abused by his grandfather, yet the boy possesses eyes and strength that torment his grandfather.
Papa loosens his belt on Jamaica Avenue,
Two blocks from home. 5:25. He strides quickly,
Coins chime in his right pants pocket. (13)

SFF: The idea for this poem came from my grandfather’s good friend, William C. Gray, an African American man who was born in Brooklyn, New York City, in 1917. He had mentioned one day that his father was very strict and abusive and every Friday evening after coming home from work, he would whip his wife and children in order to “keep them in line.” He said that none of them ever once looked at him with scorn or stood up to him. I wanted to write a poem that gave the child some strength.

RJR: The reader’s drawn to the chronological sequence that abruptly ends with a clear image of regret and catharsis:

[... ] [Papa] looks at the hazy numbers
on the alarm clock. 5:40. He strips down to his boxer shorts, sits on the bed and looks at the metal buckle.

He bites down on the metal
like a horse on a cold steel bit.(13)

The line break with “boxer” and then the image of the buckle and horse leave impressions of an evening that’s not ordinary or perhaps these evenings are realities we too often look away from.

SFF: I think it’s both—in some ways—because the grandfather does this ritual behind closed doors when he is alone. If this is the grandfather’s way of garnering attention, of communicating with his wife and grandson, then there is something deeper that is causing this type of ritual abuse.

RJR: This poem echoes “The Whipping” by Robert Hayden and “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke, yet we hear the boy gain more force in your poem.

SFF: Yes, these two poems were great inspirations as well. I originally wrote the poem as a ballad, but felt like I was missing something essential about the narrative while trying to conform to the end-rhyme scheme. So I posed new constraints for myself with the
use of this 15-minute time period which presented an ominous ur-
gency to this typical Friday evening.

**RJR:** Past, present, and future are one in your poems. What’s holy
and how adoration functions in a society are presented as a dispa-
tach in the poem “Epistle on Adoration.”. Sister Madeline, a nun,
addresses Father Joseph Hines, a priest and principal, about a new
student’s behavior through a letter dated November 13, 1987. The
interpretation of Christ and how Christians live and enact his life
are turned upside down.

**SFF:** One of the major concerns that informed my thinking for this
poem was the way in which the sacred and profane are inverted.
There are various degrees of questions that are posed by both char-
acters in an effort to create dialogue where there has been silence
or where speech is often prohibited. The verse epistle seemed to be
most fitting, since there are moral and philosophical ruminations
presented in each of the three stanzas.

**RJR:** I’m convinced the date may reveal the poet’s the speaker in
the poem. Can you be appearing as the speaker of this poem, since
you’d be about six years young?

**SFF:** In some ways, yes, I am appearing as the young boy in the
poem. I grew up Catholic and attended parochial school for eight
years. One is taught not to question God’s existence. I remember
having a serious issue with accepting a higher power that I could
not ontologically prove exists.

**RJR:** In “Haiku,” various winter-season images are cut before us
as we move in an intermingling sequence about the everyday in
Southside Jamaica, Queens:

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1

My grandmother praised
the deep silence of winter:
drug deals forced indoors. (15)
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The third line is unexpected, riveting.

**SFF:** I once had a student tell me that haikus were easy to write due
to the simple syllabic structure. However, there is so much more to this form than meets the eye. I was influenced by the narrative haiku sequences of Paul Muldoon and Sonia Sanchez.

Some of the questions I posed for myself included: (1) How does one create a narrative in 17 syllables? (2) How does one sustain this narrative in a sequence? (3) How does one incorporate aspects of nature and philosophy into this traditional form if one is writing about a harsh life in inner-city Queens, New York City? Thus, as I composed each of the nineteen sequences I realized that sharp details were important in order to capture and sustain the reader’s attention.

**RJR:** Winter seems unforgiving in the poem as the everyday can become crushing with violence and realities. We are reminded that all of this unfolds in spite of the season.

13

Spark of a fired gun
in cold night air. Damon holds
my trembling right hand.(16)

Human relationships thrive in spite of winter and the images of violence and ache.

**SFF:** The human relationships are the most memorable in these sequences, because they demonstrate the ways in which individuals, if not the community as a whole, come together in order to create meaningful lives and connections with each other despite the harsh realities they must face on a daily basis.

**RJR:** The poems in the section “The Bone Under the Almond Tree” reminded me of the living and the dead as presented in *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* (2008) by Salman Rushdie. He writes, “To understand the living in Nicaragua, I found, it was necessary to begin with the dead. The country was full of ghosts. *Sandino vive*, a wall shouted at me the moment I arrived, and at once a large pinkish boulder replied, *Cristo vive*, and, what’s more, *viene pronto*” (7).

**SFF:** In Providencia, there are “duddy tales,” or ghost stories, that are passed down from generation to generation. Many are caution-
ary tales, but others are tales about family members who died under suspicious circumstances. In this section of the book, I wanted to examine the ways in which these speakers talk about the death of young children in particular. The ghosts of these children make themselves evident in the everyday lives of these speakers who are trying to cope with profound loss. (One female speaker has ten miscarriages before she gives birth to her son.) These speakers confront these ghosts on a daily basis, either in dreams or through items that belonged to the dead, as a means of constant remembrance.

**RJR:** Marc Shell calls these the “islands of meaning” (18).

**SFF:** I think that is an appropriate phrasing. The speakers are actively seeking meaningful connections with each other, their environment, and their individual and collective struggles.

**RJR:** Bruce Dean Willis (2013) believes, “[W]ithin the act of representing a body—creating a body by image or form outside of any other, or using one’s own body to incorporate another—lies the ancient allegory of the body as both microcosm and cosmos” (2).

**SFF:** The body is an incredible shape-shifter and I was cognizant of this while writing many of these poems. One speaker in particular is gay, and he must shape his identity against the repressive mold of his family’s expectation for an only grandson.

At the same time, his biracial ethnicity presents him with a number of roles he is expected to play, and he transitions through and against them in developing his own identity. Meanwhile, he must work to claim his identity as a poet with the right to travel to Providencia and tell family stories in his own voice.

**RJR:** The speaker in “Isla Providencia” is a cartographer and historiographer when his grandfather’s gift of a conch shell awakens him to possibilities of storytelling and revisionist history through a counter-narrative:

> I pretend I am a Carib warrior, inserting my fingers into the shell’s curved aperture, like Poseidon, wielding this weapon above my head against British and Spanish.

> How easy to turn to violence. The shell’s beige,
pink and ivory no longer protective covering,  
but the blood and bone of pirates, Indians, slaves. (22)

The role of history with souvenirs, discoveries, and wishes are questioned here.

**SFF:** I’ve traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean, and conch shells and seashells are sold at tourist shops. I was thinking about the ways in which these natural objects suddenly take on a different meaning once they are made into and sold as souvenirs. They are often displayed in homes as representations of island life. I wanted to examine the other narratives that are often ignored by tourists when they travel to the Caribbean basin.

The history of privateering is glamorized. As a kid, I enjoyed swash-buckling with a plastic pirate’s sword, so I wanted to make a gesture of exposing the hidden sources of one’s imagination and knowledge about the history of the Caribbean.

**RJR:** The researcher Vincent Woodard ascribes the culture of consumption to the first contact between European colonizers and coastal Africans.

**SFF:** I was thinking about this historical culture of consumption because when one travels abroad one often brings back souvenirs for one’s self or for family members. Some of these souvenirs are gaudy and dust-collectors, but many are beautiful if carefully crafted by artisans, but the souvenir trade in many Caribbean nations is an essential form of income for many.

On the one hand, you want to contribute, but on the other, if you’re buying a typical trinket it seems inconsequential to your travel experience and personal enrichment. In the fourth section of the book, one of the speaker’s travels to Providencia and at first he takes a lot of pictures and wants to buy souvenirs, until he realizes that the search for the perfect photo or gift is causing him to ignore the sights, sounds, foods, and people of the island. He thinks it best not to be a typical tourist for the remainder of his trip and spends his time and energy on the experiences and stories during his time in Providencia.

**RJR:** The poems “Summer Offering,” “Man’s Worth,” and “Fathers
and Sons” present maleness, masculinity, violence, sexuality, and the body in the presence of a young boy.

**SFF:** These three poems act as a trinity for complex sites of maleness and masculinity as seen through the eyes of a young boy. The boy is seeking moments in which he can bond with the largely absent—both physically and emotionally—father figures in his life. In “Summer Offering,” his maternal grandfather cautions him about being too outwardly obvious about his sexuality and not to be too sensitive, yet in “Man’s Worth” the young boy must be gentle while shaving his grandfather since he has terminal cancer.

“Fathers and Sons” is the young boy’s psychic connection to his father who is physically absent, yet their experiences and struggles with racism and discrimination and feelings of inadequacy are strikingly similar.

**RJR:** Similar to an incantation or sonata, the male body is exulted in the poem “Rondeau for the Nurenev Nude.” Gay sexuality and the performing arts are celebrated as sonatas about ourselves.

**SFF:** I wrote “Rondeau for the Nurenev Nude” as a performance of an intricate ballet dance of syllables, images, and three different rhyme schemes and as a metaphor for the many struggles that the speaker encounters. The photo of Nureyev, taken in 1961 by Richard Avedon, proudly displays the dancer’s nudity.

Rumors about Nureyev’s homosexuality and being well-endowed were just beginning to abound in his circles as a ballet dancer. Avedon’s belief was that Nureyev’s impeccable body should be immortalized. Avedon’s unique ability to re-capture the classical contraposto stance demonstrates just how different and bold a statement the photo was, especially for the time period.

At first glance, the photo of Nureyev appears to be simple, but a closer look conveys a delicate balance between his vulnerability and masculinity, between his innocence and his confidence. This is the experience I have tried to capture in the poem. In each stanza, the speaker’s gaze slowly travels downward across the photographed body, suggesting that his eyes are bringing Nureyev back to life. The speaker connects with the static image of Nureyev, and the speaker’s dance and gestures insist that Nureyev is still a mov-
ing force.

Ultimately, the final line of my poem suggests that what appears entirely profane with Nureyev’s nudity, as well as the speaker’s physical and artistic reactions to the photograph itself, begins with the image of a “Simple. Male. Nude.”

RJR: In Confieso que he vivido: Memorias (1974), Neruda writes, “In my poems I could not shut my door to the street” (53). Similarly, you’ve opened your vision of poetry to everyday realms that speak of our origins to experience a sense of self and place within our bodies—human and continents. Your poems open worlds to us that were, well, inaccessible or even unnoticed. Moreover, we are reminded in the haste of our lives to remember home.

SFF: In Providencia, I wrote in many poetic forms like the ghazal, haiku, and pantoum. Some of these forms are highly stylized, and the challenge was to blend the strict fixed form with colloquial phrasing and believable contemporary speech patterns. For example, the poem “Island Voices” is an example of a pantoum, a form that intrigued me for its use of repetition. It reminded me of my childhood home in which particular stories, tales and cautions are repeated on a daily basis.

In Vince Gotera’s essay “The Pantoum’s Postcolonial Pedigree,” he advises his students that when writing a pantoum they “should seek a subject matter that is obsessive, naturalizing the mannered repetitions to make them seem motivated and sensible given the speaker’s disposition” (Finch and Varnes 257). The poem illustrates the obsessive nature of the speaker in wanting to constantly hear stories and legends about Providencia from his grandmother. The poem also stresses the importance of listening to these stories; regardless of how many times one has heard them. The repetition of these “island voices” cleverly reinforces the speaker’s desire and need to visit and write about Providencia.

RJR: Sean, thank you for sharing your poetry with us and for contributing to our diasporas and world literatures. You remind us about how interconnected we are to each other as earthlings and readers of poetry across world borders, geographies, languages, cultures, and sexualities.
SFF: Thank you so much, Joseph, for taking the time to interview me.

Works Cited


