



WHO WILL BE LOS ANGELES' 2017 POET LAUREATE?

MIKE SONKSEN

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"Art is Love is God" at Beyond Baroque.

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In early 2017, Mayor Eric Garcetti and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) will be announcing our city's next official Poet Laureate. Dating back over a century, there is an illustrious poetic tradition in Los Angeles, which the Poet Laureate is expected to propagate.

According to the DCA's website, the seven objectives of the program are to: *"Enhance the presence and appreciation of poetry and the literary arts in Los Angeles; create a focal point for the expression of Los Angeles culture through the literary arts; raise awareness of the power of literature, poetry, and the spoken word; inspire an emerging generation of critical thinkers, writers, storytellers, and literary artists; bring the literary arts to people in Los Angeles who have limited access to poetry or have few opportunities for exposure to expressive writing; encourage both the reading and writing of literature; and, create a new body of literary works that commemorate the diversity and vibrancy of the L.A. region."*

In other words, the Poet Laureate is a civic poet dedicated to serving the city and greater Los Angeles community. The deadline to apply for potential candidates has been extended to December 16th at midnight.

The Legacy of Luis Rodriguez

Before spotlighting a handful of our city's standout contemporary poets, it is necessary to reflect on the stellar role our current Poet Laureate Luis Rodriguez has filled over the last two years. The man has truly been serving the city, appearing at hundreds of schools, libraries, museums, literary festivals, civic functions and anywhere else you can imagine. As he recently wrote in a blog for the Los Angeles Public Library: *"I spoke, read or facilitated workshops in over 40 libraries as far flung as Sylmar, Sherman Oaks, Woodland Hills, Westwood, Pico-Union, Boyle Heights, Watts, Little Tokyo, and Wilmington. I addressed audiences at one of L.A. County's juvenile halls, Los Padrinos; at Grand Performances of the California Plaza; at the*

Mark Taper Auditorium with storyteller Michael Meade and John Densmore of The Doors; at City Hall's Council Chambers; during the Watts Jazz Festival; at Sirens Café in San Pedro; as speaker for the Poetry Convergence at the Skirball Museum; to support Endangered Languages at the Hammer Museum; and with the Poetry Circus at Griffith Park."

Los Angeles is truly lucky to have Luis Rodriguez, who has been selflessly serving the city since the late 1970s. Aside from being the author of 15 books, he co-owns and operates Tia Chucha's Cultural Center and Bookstore in Sylmar. In addition to his public appearances, he has also published an anthology with Tia Chucha Press that includes 160 L.A. poets. Released in March 2016, the anthology "Coiled Serpent: Poets Arising from the Cultural Quakes and Shifts of Los Angeles," was edited by Neelanjana Banerjee, Daniel A. Olivas and Ruben J. Rodriguez. Poets in the collection include well-known seasoned scribes like Wanda Coleman, Kamau Daaood, Michael C. Ford, California State Poet Laureate Dana Gioia, Peter J. Harris, Ruben Martinez, S. Pearl Sharp, Amy Uyematsu and Terry Wolverton to up-and-coming younger bards like Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo, F. Douglas Brown, Jessica Ceballos, Chiwan Choi, Francisco Escamilla, William Gonzalez, Douglas Kearney, Traci Kato-Kiriyama, Teka Lark, Karineh Mahdessian, Jeffrey Martin, Luivette Resto and Vickie Vertiz.

Rodriguez recently published a new collection of his own poems in early 2016 titled, "Borrowed Bones." Printed by Curbstone Books/Northwestern University Press, the title is taken from an excerpt of a Pablo Neruda work. Some of the poems include, "Love Poem to Los Angeles," and "Love Poem to Trini," his piece honoring his wife. Another notable section in this collection are a cycle of poems called, "People's Sonnets." Written in iambic pentameter and following the form of the Shakespearean Sonnet, these sonnets are directly relevant to the 21st Century and reflect on America, God, war, gentrification and the power of poetry. He exclaims, "The power of poetry is its stance, / page or stage, electrifying or trance."

Rodriguez's poetry fuses accessibility and verisimilitude and for this reason, I have used these sonnets and other pieces of his work in my courses that include AP English students, 11th graders, 12th graders and college freshmen. Last spring Rodriguez visited my school sharing these sonnets and other poems in an assembly. Needless to say, the students left both inspired and empowered. As Martin Espada writes in the Foreword of "Borrowed Bones," "Long before he was named Poet Laureate of Los Angeles, Luis J. Rodriguez was doing what a laureate should do: serve the community."

The Legacy of Los Angeles Poetry

Prior to Rodriguez being chosen in late 2014, Eloise Klein Healy was the city's first official Poet Laureate, appointed in December 2012. The longtime Echo Park resident born in 1943 was an excellent first choice based on her own nearly 50 plus years of poetic service to Los Angeles. Healy's poetic career began in the early 1970s at spaces like Beyond Baroque and the Woman's Building, where she was a key figure for close to two decades. Over the years she has authored five books, three chapbooks and founded Antioch University's Creative Writing program. Unfortunately, Healy resigned as Poet Laureate due to health issues early in her term but her many years of poetic service to Southern California are why she remains one of the most iconic voices in the city.

Before discussing several more contemporary iconic Los Angeles poets, a quick word also needs to be said about the legacy of poetry in the City of Angels. Early literary histories of Southern California note the writers of the Arroyo Seco in the early 20th Century, followed by writers like Robinson Jeffers. During the mid-century era, one of the most significant civic poets around Los Angeles was Thomas McGrath, while other important literary movements, including the Venice Beats and the Watts Writers Workshop, took place. In the 1970s and 1980s, Beyond Baroque, Eastside Chicano writers and Feminist poets emerged in spaces

like the Woman's Building along with the Stand Up Poets often associated with Long Beach. There are a number of small communities and various subgenres of Los Angeles Poetry.

Two of the largest shadows of Los Angeles Poetry are undoubtedly Charles Bukowski and Wanda Coleman. Though he died a generation ago, Bukowski remains the most well-known Los Angeles poet. His legacy has been discussed at great lengths in numerous publications and a few documentaries. Both of these writers were published by Black Sparrow Press and some poetry scholars argue that Wanda Coleman's work is even more relevant to the city's poetic tradition than Bukowski.

Wanda Coleman's work comprehensively covered the entire city, especially the liminal pockets between Hollywood and South Los Angeles. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Coleman had been a part of multiple communities from the Watts Writers Workshop to Beyond Baroque and even the Punk Scene of the early 1980s. Dating back to the late 1980s, Coleman was called "the unofficial poet laureate of Los Angeles." By the time the Poet Laureate program officially started in Los Angeles in late 2012, Coleman was in poor health and lived too far away to serve. Unfortunately, a year later, Coleman passed away. Nonetheless, her pioneering work paved the way for the rich field of poets who now carry on her legacy.

It is not an exaggeration to say that there are thousands of poets in Los Angeles and perhaps even a few dozen that are qualified to be the next Poet Laureate. The following poets named below have all lived in Los Angeles for over 25 years and have each served hundreds of hours in civic duty with their poetry in the form of hosting poetry events, publishing other poets and working as educators and activists in one form or another. This list is by no means definitive, but each of these forthcoming poets are prime candidates to be the next Poet Laureate. Here they are in alphabetical order:

Will Alexander is known internationally as the foremost contemporary Surrealist poet. Scholar Justin Desmangles writes that Alexander is a "salient cartographer of the New World's unconscious." Alexander has written over a dozen books and was recently awarded \$50,000 as the recipient of the Jackson Poetry Prize from *Poets & Writers* magazine. Alexander grew up in South Los Angeles and also went to Washington High School with Kamau Daaood. His newest book, "The Audiographic As Data," was just published this summer.

Gloria Endedina Alvarez grew up in South Central Los Angeles and is well known for beginning the first poetry workshop for Chicana females during the early 1980s. Alvarez was awarded an individual artist fellowship from the DCA and City of Los Angeles in 2009 and she has appeared widely across the city and been published in numerous anthologies. Sesshu Foster writes that, "her published bilingual poetry is also marked by her concern for what escapes translation as excess or the culturally unfamiliar or unspeakable."

Laurel Ann Bogen is the author of 10 books of poetry and short fiction. Bogen has been an active Los Angeles poet since the mid-1970s. For many years she was LACMA's literary curator and she has been teaching poetry for UCLA Extension since 1990 where she was awarded as the Outstanding Instructor of the Year in Creative Writing in 2008. Her latest book, "Psychosis in the Produce Department: New and Selected Poems from 1975-2015," was just published by Red Hen Press.

Chiwan Choi is a poet, editor, publisher and the founder of Writ Large Press. Raised in Koreatown, Choi is a raconteur of literary Los Angeles known for always organizing readings and bringing writers together from different corners of the social spectrum. In 2014, Choi spearheaded 90 for 90, a three-month literary event at Union Station that featured 90 days in a row of literary events. Choi's first book, "The Flood," was published by Tia Chucha Press and his forthcoming book will be published by Civil Coping Mechanism Press in early 2017.

Brendan Constantine is a Los Angeles native that is known as a virtuoso on the page and the stage. Currently the poet in residence at the Winward School, Constantine works closely with Beyond Baroque

Literary Arts Center in Venice and is also acclaimed for his Alzheimer's Poetry Project. His most recent book, "Dementia, My Darling," was published by Red Hen Press.

Kamau Daaood has been an active Los Angeles poet since the mid-1960s and was originally the youngest member of the Watts Writers Workshop. For 30-plus years Daaood was the primary poet of the Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra. Daaood is best known for being one of the co-founders of the World Stage in Leimert Park. His album of recorded poetry, "Leimert Park," is legendary and his book of poetry, "The Language of Saxophones," was published by City Lights. Daaood has always believed that poetry is a vehicle for social justice and the community arts.

Poet, novelist, educator and community activist, **Sesshu Foster** has taught high school English for over 30 years in East Los Angeles. Foster is lauded for his award-winning books, "Atomik Aztex," "World Ball Notebook," and "City Terrace Field Manual." Foster was also the co-editor in 1989 of "Invocation: L.A.," the first multicultural Los Angeles poetry anthology. Writer E. Tammy Kim wrote last year that "As gentrification sweeps the city, Sesshu Foster has quietly become the poet laureate of a vanishing neighborhood."

Peter J. Harris is an award-winning activist, educator, essayist and poet. His two latest books, "The Black Man of Happiness," and "Bless the Ashes," both won prominent literary awards. Harris has worked as an educator and activist all over Southern California and been a fixture in the Leimert Park poetry scene for over 25 years. His work merges heartfelt sincerity, raw honesty, and humor and debunks negative stereotypes of the African-American man. He is well loved because he empowers readers with his frank discussion about being a son, father, stepfather and grandfather.

Traci Kato-Kiriyama is a poet, organizer, teaching artist and community activist especially known for co-founding "Tuesday Night Café," in Little Tokyo back in 1998. Kato-Kiriyama has mentored hundreds of young Asian-American writers, musicians and actors, as well as done extensive organizing with the Japanese-American Cultural & Community Center and the Asian American Resource Center at Pomona College. Most recently, she has taught a series of workshops at Grand Park and her next book will be published by Writ Large Press.

Douglas Kearney is an award-winning poet, performer, professor and librettist raised in Altadena. Kearney is masterful in both reciting his work and with concrete poetry, his work comes alive equally on the page and the stage. The author of 7 books, his second collection, "The Black Automaton," was Catherine Wagner's selection for the National Poetry Series. Kearney has published widely in publications like *Poetry*, *Ploughshares* and *Lana Turner*. He teaches at CalArts where he received his MFA in Writing.

Suzanne Lummis is the founder of The Los Angeles Poetry Festival, an author of several poetry collections and the editor of "Wide Awake: Poets of Los Angeles and Beyond," the 2015 poetry anthology published by Beyond Baroque and the Pacific Coast Poetry Series. "Wide Awake," was widely acclaimed and includes over 110 Los Angeles poets. Lummis has been published in places like *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares* and *The Antioch Review*. Lummis is also an award winning instructor with the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and the winner of both the Blue Lynx Poetry Prize and Beyond Baroque's Outstanding Achievement in Poetry Award.

Los Angeles native **Ruben Martinez** is a poet, journalist, professor, performer and musician that has been active in L.A. poetry since the 1980s. From 1988 to 1993, he was a staff writer and editor at the L.A.

Weekly, where he was the first Latino to be on staff. Most recently, Martinez has served as the Fletcher Jones Chair in Literature & Writing at Loyola Marymount University. His first book, "The Other Side," from 1992 blended cultural reportage with personal memoir. His 2012 book, "Desert America: Boom and Bust in the New Old West," covered the forgotten landscapes of New Mexico and Joshua Tree.

Bill Mohr is a professor, poet, publisher and literary historian. His 2011 book, "Holdouts: The Los Angeles Poetry Renaissance 1948-1992," is one of the few books cataloging the history of Los Angeles poetry. Most recently Mohr co-edited, "Cross-Strokes," a poetry anthology of 35 poets from both Los Angeles and San Francisco. Mohr also edited and published the anthology, "Poetry Loves Poetry," in 1985. This collection

included over 35 Los Angeles poets and is one of the best chronicles of Los Angeles poetry during the Reagan era.

Marisela Norte is a Los Angeles native especially known for writing many of her poems on the Los Angeles transit system. A nearly lifelong resident of Montebello and East Los Angeles, Norte started her poetry career in the late 1970s on the heels of the Punk scene's explosion across the Eastside. Norte's bilingual poems describe the real Los Angeles not televised. Scholar Sophie Rachmuhl writes that Norte's "interweaving of both languages denounces the exploitation hidden by cultural images and slogans."

Amy Uyematsu is the author of five books of poetry, the two most recent are with Red Hen Press. A graduate of Pasadena High and UCLA, Uyematsu taught math in the public school system for over 30 years. She crafts potent poetry from family memories and daily occurrences. In 1971 during her UCLA studies, she co-edited "Roots: An Asian American Reader," the first document of its kind. Years later in 1992, with poems like "You Come from St. Louis" and "Mail Order," Uyematsu satirized xenophobia and ignorance of Asian culture.

Pam Ward is a poet, fiction writer and graphic designer who has been very active in literary Los Angeles since the 1980s. A UCLA graduate and recipient of a "California Arts Council Fellow in Literature" and "New Letters Literary Award," Ward grew up in the Crenshaw District near 54th and Crenshaw. She is equally adept at both poetry and fiction. In addition to her extensive poetry, Ward has authored novels like, "Want Some, Get Some" and "Bad Girls Burn Slow." All of her work is set in contemporary Los Angeles and she has a gift for capturing the voices of our city.

Terry Wolverton is a poet, novelist, editor, educator, activist and publisher that has been active in Los Angeles poetry for over 40 years. Dating back to her early work with the Woman's Building, Wolverton has mentored hundreds of poets from all over the city and authored over 10 books. In addition to her own work, she has edited several anthologies and currently runs a creative space in Silver Lake called Writers at Work.

Wolverton's City Lights book, "Insurgent Muse," is considered one of the definitive accounts of the Woman's Building. Her most recent anthology, "Bird Float, Tree Song," featured her work in collaboration with 12 other Angeleno poets.

This list is by no means definitive. There are many other qualified poets who would be outstanding candidates for Poet Laureate. Writers like Michael C. Ford, Harry Northup, Holly Prado and founder of the Friends of the Los Angeles River, Lewis MacAdams all have extensive experience dating back to the early 1970s. Moreover, there are also many other younger poets in their 20s and 30s publishing and educating that are potential Poet Laureates in the future like Rocio Carlos, Ashaki Jackson, Francisco Escamilla, Xochitl-

Julisa Bermejo, Iris deAnda, William Gonzales, Vickie Vertiz and Janice Lee among many others. A quick word also needs to be said about the recent Urban Word Youth Poet Laureate position. There have now been three different Los Angeles Youth Poet Laureates: Amanda Gorman, Julia Horwitz and Rhiannon McGavin. These teen poets serve a similar role to the official Poet Laureate, but they focus more exclusively on literary events catered to young writers.

There are also several notable organizations like the Get Lit Players, WriteGirl, Say Word and Street Poets which work with schools, afterschool centers and juvenile halls using the power of poetry to empower and inspire youth. There is no question that poetry is alive in Los Angeles. Salute to Luis Rodriguez, all of the organizations and poets mentioned above and all the citizens in our great city using poetry to uplift and inspire the landscape of L.A. Letters.