

Voices of the City: Robin Coste Lewis' fierce and arresting poetry has its roots in Compton

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The white fence is new but the tree she planted as a child still stands in front of the wood house, now stucco, pale yellow and cracked, forgotten Christmas lights hanging from its eaves. She laughs.

Time sucks her back, the way it does, and she talks about backyard camping, cockfights and how men dressed up in suits after dinner and strolled through Compton until way after dark, imagining what they might have become if they were another color. Not black.

It's in her poetry, the way one's own skin can be a terrible, beautiful thing. Robin Coste Lewis steps to the sidewalk on South Central Avenue, a half-century swirling around her. She learned to ride a bike here; the family two doors down kept chickens. It seemed then like country and city were mixed into a little girl's idyll, before Compton became "[Straight Outta Compton](#)" and before her first boyfriend, a geeky 16-year-old, was shot and killed in a drive-by.

"This," she said, "is the X mark on my planet."

Lewis is a poet who won't let you look away. Her verse reaches through racism and history; the best of it startles and amazes with vivid, sly and subtle turns of phrase that conjure demons still not extinguished. There is treachery in nostalgia, shame in a nation's sins. Her debut collection, "Voyage of the Sable Venus," which won the National Book Award in 2015, is a disturbing, if riveting, exploration of how the black body, especially the woman's, has been broken, cataloged and used, defined by and enslaved to the white world.

Robin Coste Lewis with her fellow 2015 National Book Award winners, from left, Adam Johnson in fiction

Robin Coste Lewis with her fellow 2015 National Book Award winners, from left, Adam Johnson in fiction, Neal Shusterman for YA and Ta-Nehisi Coates for nonfiction. (Beowulf Sheehan)

In her poem "Frame," which reminiscences on her Compton childhood, she speaks of her mother ordering books that pretended the world was prettier than it was: "So that I could see a photograph of an uncommon colored body — besides a burnt body, or a bent body, or a bleeding body, or the murdered body of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King — Junior — . . ." Lewis has the same desire for her 9-year-old son, making sure he can grow up somewhere so "he gets to not know he's prey."

That last word dissolves in sharp, stubborn pieces. She knows something about stubborn; it helped her survive a life-altering accident and led her to an unexpected honor.

In April, Los Angeles Mayor [Eric Garcetti](#) named Lewis, who has a master's degree from Harvard Divinity School, where she studied [Sanskrit](#), the Poet Laureate of Los Angeles. She succeeds the poet and novelist Luis J. Rodriguez, and plans to use her two-year tenure to focus on cultural reconciliation and the stories, poetry and lives of indigenous peoples and those who have come to Los Angeles, much like her own family, as part of endless migrations. Each ethnicity that has arrived here, she says, shares one thing.

“Language is the bones of our existence,” says Lewis, 52, who describes her roots as Afro-Creole. “Identity as a fluid thing. Culture as a fluid thing. I’m not interested at all in saying what black ain’t because black culture and black diasporas are scattered all over the world and it’s such a beautiful thing. I feel like if we fix black culture, we’ll stop looking for it and stop finding it. I always want to keep looking.”

I could feel language, but I couldn’t get to it. There’s so much about mortality I confront every day. — Poet Robin Coste Lewis, on recovering from a brain injury

The daughter of a math-minded janitor who mastered the Rubik’s Cube, Lewis almost lost her words 17 years ago when she fell through a hole in the floor of a San Francisco restaurant. She suffered permanent brain injury that forced her to re-learn nouns and verbs and syntax. During her recovery, she would write one line a day, which taught her the power of syllable, rhythm and precision. It made her a poet.

THE AFTERMATH

“I could feel language, but I couldn’t get to it,” she says. “There’s so much about mortality I confront every day. There’s so much about aging. I think in some ways I’m aging prematurely. I couldn’t hold a pen after it happened. A nurse taped a pen in my hand, and I fell madly in love with her at that moment.”

She’s on medication and sees a neurologist. Words trick her sometimes, which for a writer she notes is both confounding and delicious.

“My face and hands get numb and my eyeballs feel like they’re in my clavicle,” she says, adding that she often feels she is two people, the interior she was born with and the other that came after the fall. “What does it feel like to have one self? I don’t know if it’s quite a death, but something happens and then another self emerges and they have a relationship, but they’re not the same person.”

She contemplates this — far in time and distance from Compton — while sitting in her Silver Lake home, apologizing if words wriggle into strange places. She takes a pill, sits, looks out the window to the treetops. She’s going to Paris in the morning. There is a scattered-ness about her, but then a fierce focus, as if a terrier has spotted a rustle in a faraway field. Her laugh is round and full and could wake up any number of sleeping things. She rises in front of a desk lamp and stacks of books, including “The Conference of the Birds” by 12th century Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar and “Resistance, Rebellion, Life: 50 Poems Now.”

She glances west. “I’m very seduced by L.A.’s beauty,” she says. “There’s a whole little nation of hummingbirds living in my backyard. I do think L.A. is just as intellectually rigorous as any other place, but that’s not the stereotype of it, because of the dominant influence of Hollywood. The beaches. The palm trees. The manufactured identity we’ve put into the world is unfortunate because there’s so many brilliant histories that are taking place here all the time.”

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After spending years on the East Coast, though, Lewis credits Los Angeles’ progressiveness. “I maintain that in our city what is happening with regard to integration is something a lot of the rest of the nation could model,” she says. “Black women pushing white babies down the street in California are their mothers; on the East Coast, they’re their nannies. That’s it in a nutshell for me.”

One of her biggest influences is the late Los Angeles poet [Wanda Coleman](#), who like Lewis has an eye that can turn a neighborhood into a carnival with a sliver of longing. In one of her favorite Coleman poems, “Dreamwalk,” Lewis saw herself back when she was a restless girl on the brink: “palms nod against the neon rainbow sky/the moths

come/and the starlings/and the dragonflies/you know something important is going to happen/to you/hurry, you whisper, please hurry.”

Robin Coste Lewis, poet laureate of Los Angeles, visiting Watts Towers.

Robin Coste Lewis, poet laureate of Los Angeles, visiting Watts Towers.

Lewis leaves her Silver Lake home and drives south on her favorite pilgrimage to Watts Towers, built over three decades by Simon Rodia, a laborer and odd-jobber who cobbled steel rebar, concrete, mesh and broken and discarded things into an Italian immigrant’s will to create a singular art. In a blue dress with a light scarf, an outfit that evoked Sunday school, Lewis strolls along glass and porcelain mosaics and a headless angel that stands in the hot, clear sky.

“I love that he made it from found materials, which as a poet means a lot to me,” says Lewis, who has a doctorate in poetry and visual studies from USC. “When I come here, I do feel like the 4-year-old is skipping around in me. You’re always learning more and more from these towers. You can never exhaust it.”

The Watts Towers epitomize the ingenuity and grit of the newcomer, and Lewis worries, in these petulant times, where the nation might be headed. “What Trump’s campaign did brilliantly through the spectacle of hate was shut us all down,” she says. “The country was getting better under Obama. Did we still need to work? Hell, yeah, but we were achieving it. What we’re going through now is such a major regression.

“My hope,” she adds, “is that whiteness is on its last gasp as an identity of power and authority.”

Her epic poem “Voyage of the Sable Venus” is an indictment of whiteness and a “look at what this crazy Occidental history has projected onto the black female body.” The work stretches from 38,000 B.C. to the present, and its verse is “comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects” in museums, libraries and other institutions. The poem is an unsettling peeling back of layers — from ancient Egypt to the American civil rights movement — that reveal the body as a vessel for oppression:

Two Black Overseers

Flogging Two Negro Slaves

One a Nude Man Suspended from a Tree

The Other a Woman

Bared to the Waist and Tied

To a Tree as a White Woman

Observes Head and Shoulders

Of a Slave Woman Seen in Left Profile

A Standing Female Slave Nude to the Hips

With Manacles on Her Wrists

Holding Up a Drapery

And Looking Downward

Other poems reside closer to home, including “Beauty’s Nest,” written after a conversation with her father, Henry Gabriel Lewis, who fought in World War II, couldn’t afford college and became a janitor. The poem is about four black soldiers returned home from the war and driving across country. They arrive at the Grand Canyon at night. They stand at its edge, but the splendor below is hidden in darkness. They decide to spend the night nearby and come back in the morning. But no place will have them.

You jump back

into your wide tan Ford

and begin to drive

again — again — past

all the motels, and their signs,

which, were it not just

after midnight, you know —

and could see — say

WHITES ONLY

Henry Gabriel Lewis never saw the Grand Canyon. But his daughter did. She called him from the road and said: “It restructured my molecules.” He didn’t say much. She pressed him and he told his story. A quiet followed, mixed with shame and history, the pinch of truth. “There’s a silence that is both insult and disgust,” she says, remembering that call. “How could my child be so stupid” not to understand the way America was?

“When I get too prissy,” she says, “I think about that.”

It’s all there in Compton, those stories, the seeds of poetry. Standing on the sidewalk in front of her old house, Lewis can see back in time to men in suits and women in prim dresses, strolling the avenue past lawns and neighbors and whispers, all of them part of a great migration, many of them doctors and lawyers in their old places, but in L.A., they became something else. She smiles at the stirrings of all those ghosts, and of her, as a child, small and brash and “capable of imagining just one single dream.”

“Speaking of all the intelligence that’s in Compton that never got noticed and why the stereotype of Compton annoys me so much is because you have no idea who was there. None.”

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