

Contemporary Poetry Interview: Michelle Brittan Rosado
in conversation with *Genevieve Kaplan*

Genevieve Kaplan: I met Michelle Brittan Rosado's poems when she read from her just-released chapbook, *Theory on Falling into a Reef* (Anhinga Press, 2016), and I remember being so captivated by her work, which is precise, narrative, and moving as well as inventive and musical. Michelle's poems tend to feel very located in our shared landscape of California, they make keen observations, and they speak to directly readers. When her full-length book, *Why Can't It Be Tenderness*, was selected by Aimee Nezhukumatathil for the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry and published by University of Wisconsin Press, of course I wanted to talk with her more about it! Happily, Michelle, the PR poetry judge this year, agreed to offer insights into her poetic process and attentions. Read on:

GK: *Can you tell us a little bit about the process you went through as you wrote, compiled, and published these poems? We know some of these poems here were previously collected in your chapbook, Theory on Falling into a Reef (Anhinga, 2016), but can you tell us more about their evolution? Encountering a completed book like Why Can't It Be Tenderness, we sometimes forget to take into account the journey from manuscript to book, from poem to manuscript, from idea to poem.... What was your process like?*

MBR: If I learned anything from this process, it was to trust divine timing. Strangely, *Why Can't It Be Tenderness* took exactly a decade: I mark the book's beginning with my move to the Central Valley to begin my MFA at California State University, Fresno on August 1, 2008, and the final edits were due to my publisher on July 31, 2018. Although the prospect of this project taking ten years would have been discouraging to my younger self, the timing now strikes me as just right.

My MFA thesis, which was titled *The Numerology of Us* then, was the book's first iteration, and I continued to work on it afterward and during my time as a PhD student in Literature and Creative Writing at University of Southern California. I published individual poems in journals and anthologies, though I also took a four-year break from publishing to dive into my doctoral coursework, which gave me a new outlook on the project when I started sending out poems again. For the next few years I struggled with the order of the poems and how to divide the manuscript in sections; it wasn't until I put together the chapbook that I could see the book's core clearly, and the final arrangement crystallized around that condensed shape.

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Along the way, I became a mother, and a second manuscript about parenthood and lineage began to emerge, so I decided to make some deep incisions to the manuscript for a second project that's now the one I'm currently working on. In hindsight, my education and personal life kept sending ripples through my writing process, which sometimes felt like interruptions—but these were the very events I needed to push the book forward.

GK: *We see a lot of attention to themes of naming and identification throughout your book, beginning with your first poem, “Ode to the Double L,” which draws attention to your first name. Other poems (“A Name Made of Asterisks,” “Asking About my First Name,” and even “The Dissolution Paperwork...” and “How to Use Microsoft Paint...”)* continue to investigate the human problem inherent in being identified by a word. *What also excites me here is that in these poems you turn what we most often understand as poetic license—an ability to re-name or re-present objects*

in powerful figurative ways—into a simultaneously figurative and literal process. Can you talk a little more about how naming is important in your creative work?

MBR: Naming is definitely an obsession of mine, and I appreciate how you described poetry as a process of re-naming and re-presenting. Adrienne Rich’s short essay, “Woman and Bird,” has been a touchstone for me. In it, she writes about encountering a bird perched on her car and trying to track down its species in ornithology books, and then “began to think about the names, beginning with the sound and image delivered in the name ‘Great Blue Heron,’ as tokens of a time when naming was poetry.” Yes, poetry gives us the power to name and re-name, and I love how Rich suggests that all naming and re-naming—even in science and politics—is poetic as well.

But even before I read her essay, I’ve been obsessed with personal names and my own name. I became conscious of this in my previous life as an undergrad in sociology, writing a research paper on mixed-race identity construction. I came across an academic article—and I wish I still knew the title, but only its argument has stayed with me—which was about individuals whose first and last names might be white-passing on paper, but whose middle names could reveal the other side of their lineage. This wasn’t an option for me because my middle name isn’t Bidayuh, the tribe to which half of my family in Malaysian Borneo belongs. I often think I became a writer simply out of the frustration of moving through most of my life with the name “Michelle Brittan,” and people in offices and waiting rooms looking around for a white girl rather than the person standing in front of them. Poems gave me the time and space to craft a sense of self in historical context that daily life and interactions didn’t seem to allow.

GK: *Your narrator is a powerful presence throughout Why Can’t It Be Tenderness. In some ways, she seems so average – we follow your narrator to yoga,*

to the eye doctor, to the laundromat; “I” falls in love, or looks out a window, or gets in a car accident. “I” may be quite relatable through these everyday actions, but she’s also very specific and precise—we get to know her family relationships, her history, her location in California’s central valley. “I” acts as both an anchor and a lens through which to view the world of these poems. When do you find yourself—the real Michelle—identifying most with the narrator in your poems? When are you most pleased seeing narrator “Michelle” presented on the page?

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MBR: It might seem counterintuitive, but despite all my devotion to writing in the voice of a first-person speaker, I’ve worked hard not to identify with the “I” in my poems. On the one hand, yes, my personal experiences and memories often provide the fabric from which I cut my poems, but I want the final product to feel like something separate from me. If anything, I am less concerned with my sense of self than the reader’s experience. I’ve often heard writers say they write for themselves, but really, I think I’m writing for my younger self. What’s the poem younger Michelle could have read while experiencing one life event or another? What’s the poem I needed and never got?

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The most meaningful responses I receive from readers and audience members are always when they say they could personally identify with a feeling in a poem I’ve written or read aloud at an event. This is, I think, why I’m always drawn writing in the first-person; it offers an intimacy that, hopefully, invites another person inside a life. The “I” on the page isn’t me, but rather, a meeting place.

GK: *The speaker “I” as sort of a “meeting place” for readers seems so entirely correct – what a lovely way of putting it!*

Going back to our question of location, what strategies did you follow for organizing or situating the poems in this book? We notice cities like Fresno and Vacaville, or counties like Solano, mentioned in titles and poems. How/why is locating important for this collection?

MBR: Location and geography, for me, offer concrete and historicized ways to explore identity and race. When I first began writing poetry, I felt the burden of explanation when consciously writing from the experience of someone who is mixed-race and the child of an immigrant. But if I could indicate in a title or epigraph where a poem was set, it invited curiosity about the positionality of the speaker.

I picked up this strategy from Natasha Trethewey and Aimee Nezhukumatathil, both writers whose work has been so instructive to me because they can accomplish a rich sense of interiority in poems where titles and epigraphs do so much of the heavy lifting to tell us where we are. It was therefore a huge surprise and thrill to learn that Aimee had selected *Why Can't It Be Tenderness* for the Felix Pollak Prize, as the contest then had been judged anonymously and I had no idea it would pass through the hands of a poet I've long admired.

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At the same time, while poetry of place can be so particular, it also strikes me as radically universalizing. Describing a particular landscape somehow encourages the reader to parallel these images against their own sense of belonging.

GK: *I'm drawn to how your poems here often respond to paintings, photographs, or other pieces of art. I especially enjoy how you make this ekphrastic gesture distinctly personal when you respond to "Photograph Taken by my Paternal Grandmother on Her Honeymoon, 1944." Can you tell us more about using images or art objects as ways to enter into or complicate poems?*

MBR: I'm very drawn to images and the visual world, and I think my engagement with art is more incidental than intentional. I'm also indebted to poet friends who've brought art to my attention, such as the *Vanishing Ship* sculpted by John Roloff and *Double Masked Heads* painted by Susan Rothenberg.

Because I so often write from the first-person perspective, art has given me an opportunity to step back from the particulars of a personal memory or scene and enter a different realm that nevertheless feels familiar. I'm also in love with the idea that, in this age, people can google an art piece and look at the same image I have. Art becomes a portal where we can encounter one another and attempt to enter the same feeling together.

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When it comes to craft, visual art demands a certain kind of space-taking in the real world that I admire; poetry is less physical, I think. In this way, visual art has prompted me to think of the page as a canvas or three-dimensional area for making.

GK: *Who are some of your all-time favorite poets? or: What have you read lately that has made an impression? Are there certain titles or poets that you can recommend for us?*

MBR: There are so many poets I admire, but a handful always nourish me in ways I didn't know I needed when I pick up their books. Li-Young Lee and Sharon Olds were early favorite poets of mine because of the ways their poems dive deep into generational inheritances, and how we form a sense of self in the shapes left behind by those who come before us. I'm indebted to the "Fresno school" of poets like Gary Soto, Philip Levine, Larry Levis, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Brian Turner, whose work

reminded me that working-class experiences are not only deserving subjects of poems but also possess a dignity that transcends the limits of poetry. I mentioned Rich earlier, and her body of work as well as Audre Lorde's always reveal new things to me upon rereading.

I'm excited to jump into Rick Barot's new collection, *The Galleons*, and when the academic year comes to a close, I have a stack of poetry books waiting for me this summer, including new voices I'm just getting to learn. As with writing, I think reading also works on divine timing; sometimes I think I'm falling behind, but poetry reminds me of the wonders of moving slowly.