

I DON'T WANT TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Belynda Gonzales and Xavier Rice interviews

Joshua Jennifer Espinoza

Joshua Jennifer Espinoza is the author of *I Don't Want To Be Understood*, a poetic collection of identity as a transgender woman and the ongoing act of self-defining. Espinoza has taught creative writing at Occidental College and holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of California, Riverside. Throughout *I Don't Want To Be Understood*, Espinoza's poems often carry a defiant yet vulnerable tone that reflects the tense experiences she has had to endure as a transgender woman in public spaces, within family dynamics, and when resisting societal expectations. As a reader, Xavier and I appreciated how her poetry does not try to soften these experiences, instead they are real and raw, allowing for readers to feel discomfort that heightens the impact of these challenges throughout her work. As a whole, this collection offers a deeply personal account of what it's like to be transgender and the emotional strength required to protect oneself and continuously define yourself on your own terms.

PR: First of all, I would love to thank you, Jennifer, for taking the time to answer a few questions regarding your poetry collection, *I Don't Want To Be Understood*. While reading we noticed the repetition of titles such as several being simply called "Poem," and many having "ritual" in the title, such as "Airport Ritual," "Makeup Ritual," and "Loss Ritual." Could you share with us your process for titling poems in this collection?

JJE: Thank you, it's my pleasure! To answer your first question, I am notoriously bad at titling poems. My first collection contained all untitled poems. In grad school, my creative writing professors tried to push me to do more with my titles. I think with the poems called "Poem", those might've been ones I would have left untitled in the past; maybe I feel like they speak for themselves as poems. I still title poems "Poem", so that hasn't changed. I also feel like there is a thread between the "Poem" poems, something to do with process and how it relates to the self. The ritual poems are also connected in various ways that have to do with repetition and survival. But mostly, I just use my intuition whenever choosing a title for a poem.

PR: We think your intuition is great! Now, we love the repetition of "I am not afraid." in "Airport Ritual" when you write "I am not afraid/I pretend my body is not part of my narrative./I am not afraid/I get scanned by the body scanner./I am not afraid/My anomaly is unspotted..." It feels like a

breath is being taken, trying to calm yourself. Could you share what the repetition is doing for you? What about when it is repeated six times without any lines in between?

JJE: It's sort of a protective phrase, like lying to yourself until it becomes true. I've had to learn a lot of techniques over the years for distress management, and the repetition of that phrase felt like a good encapsulation of those sorts of techniques. It's not fixing the situation, and it's not even really true, but it's allowing me to persist through. It's sort of beautiful, funny, and tragic at the same time.

PR: We know everyone has their own experiences with religion, and while reading, we noticed that in several poems, such as "The Heat Death of the Universe" and "Coming Out," you refer to God as a "she." You write "...like God asking herself/if she really exists." and "How I'd tell myself God would do whatever/she wanted...". Could you tell us about why you decided to refer to God this way?

JJE: Yeah, I used to do this more frequently in my poetry, but I've always gone back and forth with God's pronouns. I guess it depends on the context in which God is being invoked. To me, God isn't a person with a gender, so ultimately it doesn't matter what pronoun I use, but at the same time "she" and "he" can certainly act as windows through which I or the figures in my poems are experiencing the divine in that moment.

PR: We enjoyed the part in "The Present" where it says "I/really/pulled/it/off," with each word being a different line in the stanza. It creates a great pause compared to if it were a single line. We would love to know, how do you go about including those sections in your work?

JJE: Thank you, it's sort of an intuitive thing that happens in the moment as I'm writing. Around the time I wrote many of the poems in this collection, including "The Present," it was the early days of Covid and like many people I sort of had a protracted spiral where my sense of reality felt shaky, and this reflected in my poems through new and unexpected breakages in the line, in the form and shape of the poems in general. I found myself building shapes and "word structures" with lots of repetition and sonic evocation. Most of that work felt too weird and experimental to share, at least for now, but remnants of this show up in some of the lineation choices of the poems in this collection.

PR: I love how the structure is being used so reflectively throughout! On the topic of structure, we really love the stanza format in "Particulate Matter," with the white space being played with a lot compared to other pieces. Could you explain the process of deciding on using the structure?

JJE: Similar to the answer above, I was in a headspace where I really wanted to push past the line and let the poems float and dance around the page. With “Particulate Matter”, the shape sort of resembles smoke, drifting particles, the tension between form and formlessness.

PR: Now, I want to circle in on the emotional aspect when writing your poems. Reading *I don't want to be Understood*, readers can feel and see the vulnerability of your experience as a trans woman in the United States through poems like “You’re Going to Die Today” when you write “...before a group of men recognized you as something out-of-place...All you know is the knife-sharp sensation of stare. And the muttering—*did you see that. what is that. hey you.* You shudder to give it voice.” Similarly, we see this in “Airport Ritual.” How do you decide what to reveal and what to withhold?

JJE: That is a really good question, and one I am still trying to figure out. I’ve written many things I’m not sure I’ll ever share because of this question. I think having distance from an experience helps. Sometimes you can see it a little better from a distance, and that can help you discern if this is a truth you feel you need or want to share. I think ultimately, it comes down to the question of whether or not I feel I can transform the experience into something beautiful and honest. I try to avoid sharing difficult moments just for the sake of it. The possibility of transcendence must always be present.

PR: That’s a really insightful way of framing vulnerability, something transforming. In another one of your poems, “Makeup Ritual,” (pg. 8) you write, “It helps to have a name even though/a name is a room you can never leave.” How do you see naming as a form of stability/identification and a kind of confinement (within yourself or in society)?

JJE: I guess I’m using names as a stand in here for all the structures that simultaneously contain, define, and hurt us. I don’t believe there is anything wrong with celebrating personal victories you achieve within this system, like getting to change your name to one that feels right to you. That was definitely a celebratory moment for me! But, I think I long for something more, like a world where one can define oneself outside of those confines and not be subjected to punishment for stepping outside the lines.

PR: There’s this line in your poem “The Threat” (pg. 11) that I found interesting, “There were pieces/of me that made sense/as long as they remained in pieces.” What does fragmentation allow you to express about identity (in confrontation to threat), do you think without these “pieces,” you risk oversimplifying some parts of yourself? Such as in your last poem *It Doesn't Matter If I'm Understood*, it seems to suggest that to be understood is to be limited.

JJE: Fragmentation allows the speaker in the poems to avoid being defined and therefore trapped in the box of identity. There is so much to say and I wanted these poems to sing through different windows and worlds, and for the experiences and images in the poems to be understood as one person's experience without feeling confined within the identity of "trans woman". As specific as these poems are, I feel like they speak to things that a wide range of people can understand on an emotional level. Most people know what it is like to feel trapped, afraid, alone, in love, heartbroken, ashamed, proud, etc. In my work, I try to be true to myself while searching for the ways that my story is not singular.

PR: It's really compelling how your work resists being reduced into a singular identity while still remaining deeply personal. I know in an earlier interview a few years ago with *The Creative Independent*, you described your writing process as a way of emotional processing—where poems once flowed out as a sort of release, but later became more difficult as you got better at processing since it felt you had to be intentional and consciously aware of your emotions. You also mentioned occasionally returning to recurring themes and searching for the "right poem" to resolve this. As of now (recent years), to what extent do poems help you process certain thoughts and emotions and to what extent do you use it for closure?

JJE: I definitely spent several years overthinking it. That interview is a good example of this! Recently, I feel more attuned to my poetic practice in the way that I just wait for a poem to come and try not to worry about emotional processing or anything like that. I have, like, pretty decent therapeutic tools for that now! So, I just let the poems be what they are. I've found this has allowed the process to get back into more of a flow.

PR: In a more recent interview with "Frozen Sea" regarding *I Don't Want to be Understood*, you mentioned that after publishing this collection, you felt distant from the voice on the page and that it didn't feel entirely yours. Do you think this emotional distance reflects the fact that it doesn't necessarily matter to you whether people comprehend you or not? Can you expand a little more about this feeling?

JJE: I think a big part of this feeling had to do with the overall organizing principle of the collection; it's essentially a memoir in verse, and this means I've created this physical object that now stores part of my life in it. It was a strange feeling to publish it. I was grateful, happy, and proud, but also felt sick about it in a certain way; maybe it goes back to that fear of being defined. Also, through the process of writing and publishing this collection, I was forced to deal with a lot of past pain that I had not fully processed. In this act of creating the book, without realizing it or thinking about it, I forced myself to integrate a lot of my own life, and in doing so, I became a more whole person. Rereading those poems

from a new vantage point initially felt strange and unsettling. As I've continued to work on dealing with the past, my relationship to those poems and that version of myself has improved. Now, when I read them, I just feel grateful to that person.

(Thank you, Jennifer!)