Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

El Martillo Press: A Literary Revolution

David A. Romero · Thursday, July 6th, 2023

El Martillo Press brings a hammer to the world of independent publishing

> "*Speech is my hammer / bang the world into shape / Now let it fall"* – Mos Def, "Hip Hop," Black on Both Sides

This is one of my favorite quotes from all of hip-hop. It's one of my favorite quotes about writing. It equates the act of writing and performing with political activity. With it, the artist now known by the name of Yasiin Bey embraces intentional writing; what some call didacticism and others, sermonizing, or propaganda, through the working-class metaphor of the hammer. Off the rip, Mos Def wants his audience to know he wants to change the world for the better.

So do we.

Matt Sedillo and I have launched El Martillo Press in the hopes of starting a literary revolution.

The first line of the description of our press is as follows: "El Martillo Press publishes writers whose pens strike the page with clear intent; words with purpose to pry apart assumed norms and to hammer away at injustice."

As El Martillo, we embrace writers who write about political topics, who write with that same intention of changing the world. It's no coincidence that many of our writers come from a background of grassroots political work and currently work in education, working to inspire the next generation.



Matt Sedillo and I share in that commitment to activism, beyond our works as poets. Matt is a current member of the Association of Raza Educators (ARE) and the Raza Unida Party. I am a former organizer with the student PIRGs and was a student activist with the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). I have also donated $4000 over a period of six years through The Romero Scholarship for Excellence in Spoken Word to high school students for their creation of poems addressing social justice and for their volunteer work in their communities.

I'm proud to announce that our first wave of El Martillo Press poets includes the HBO Def Poet, playwright, and nationally-touring performance artist, Paul S. Flores, for his debut, *WE STILL BE: Poems and Performances*; the world-renowned Italian poet and archaeologist Flaminia Cruciani, for her bilingual 'greatest hits' compilation of poems, *A Crown of Flames: Selected Poems and Aphorisms*; the poet, short story writer, and editor as featured on NPR, Margaret Elysia Garcia, with her debut collection of poems, *the daughterland*; the second Pomona Poet Laureate and host of Obsidian Tongues open mic, Ceasar K. Avelar and his debut collection *God of the Air Hose and Other Blue-Collar Poems*; and the poet and professor at Santa Ana College, Donato Martinez with his debut, *Touch the Sky*.



Among them, their collections include blurbs from Juan Felipe Herrera, Luis J. Rodriguez, Tongo Eisen-Martin, Bobby LeFebre, Susie Bright, Michelle Cruz Gonzales, Obed Silva, Linda Ravenswood, and many, many more.

In the future we look to publish not only books of poetry, but memoirs, fiction, and political nonfiction as well.

When I asked Matt Sedillo what the single spark was that inspired his desire to create El Martillo he said, “I love all of our authors. They’re incredible. But it was Ceasar, the current Pomona Poet Laureate, who wasn’t that when I first met him, who I heard and decided I wanted to publish first, who inspired me to want to get into publishing. I knew Ceasar had a special talent, a powerful voice, talking about labor, talking about work, about struggle, about the dignity of our [Latino] people that needed to heard, needed to be read. I really wanted to publish his first book.”

After organizing multiple readings with a team of FlowerSong Press authors based in California that took on the name “#flowerstrong” on social media, Matt and I came to understand the success we could have if we combined our efforts with other poets. Thanks to our pressmates, notably, Briana Muñoz and Fernando Albert Salinas, our time as #flowerstrong took us to New York, San

Francisco, San Diego, and all throughout Los Angeles, as well as for virtual readings for bookstores and universities in Washington and Texas. We're now raising a new banner, one greatly inspired by FlowerSong and the tireless work of its editor-in-chief Edward Vidaurre, but with a focus on the working class and on working poets.

It's clear to most what I mean by the working class. What do I mean by working poet?

The second line of our description is as follows, *"El Martillo Press proactively publishes writers looking to pound the pavement to promote their work and the work of their fellow pressmates."*

For El Martillo Press, we want the hustlers. We want the grinders. We want people who will drive to bookstores, ask to meet with the managers, and ask to be carried. We want people who have travelled to multiple venues. People who have organized their own tours of readings and performances. We want those who might've been refused by other presses because their work wasn't deemed, "literary enough." We also want those who have been published by a major or a university press, who were discouraged from promoting themselves, became dissatisfied with that kind of arrangement, and now want to try something new.

Some authors looking to be published look to their publisher to not only be their publisher, but their managers, their promoters, their agents. Sometimes, they expect to work very little and have their publisher do everything to sell their books for them.

Don't get us wrong. Matt and I have a proven track record for sales, marketing, and distribution for our own books, and we are bringing those talents to bear in the promotion of our authors. That being said, as a poet who has worked so long for over a decade, it would infuriate me to no end to design promotional materials for poets to not have them share them, to book shows and never see the poets ever try to book readings or performances for themselves, and worst yet, to give free copies to an author and never see an order from them for more copies.

We have a stake in the success of our authors. We will do what we can to help them succeed. We have unique policies of transparency and profit-sharing to facilitate that. We're looking to create a more equitable relationship between publishers and authors. In everything, we seek to treat our authors the way that we would like to be treated.

Another way we set ourselves apart from many independent presses is by intending to never have an open period for submissions. In contrast to those more traditional presses, we are committed to only publishing works by authors that we have established working relationships with, or authors that our own authors have had working relationships with. This'll help us to know that we can trust them to turn out to events and work hard to promote their own work and that of their pressmates.



And for anyone thinking that's going to be a shrinking circle of authors, or some kind of "old boy's club" don't know that as touring spoken word artists who mingle with academics, political organizers, page poets, and slam poets alike, Matt and I know a lot of people, and those people know a lot of people. Between the two of us, we've been in the game for over two decades and have met writers from all over the country and all over the world.

Matt summed up our lack of open submissions this way, "We're not here to tell people to submit and then delight in refusing them. I don't get that. If we say we want to publish you, you're in."

Speaking as to who is "in," we are honored to announce that our next wave of authors will include Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Sonia Gutiérrez, Matthew Cuban Hernandez and Alex Alfaro.

We are far from the first press to launch with an unabashedly political agenda. Haymarket, Beacon, Seven Stories, City Lights, Black Freighter, our allies with VAGABOND and the press that most directly inspired us, FlowerSong, have all previously carried on great leftist traditions in publishing highlighting the narratives of the oppressed and their continued struggles for liberation and equality.

We hope to leave our own mark, establish our own legacy, by being pro-Latino, pro-Chicano, internationalist, and anticolonial, pro-working-class, with an interest in publishing the most groundbreaking and hardworking authors, wherever they may come from.

Different product. Different relations of production. A different impact we are hoping to leave from many of our contemporaries. This is how we justify saying we hope to start “a literary revolution.”

The world will come to know us by our hammer and laurel. As I often say, harkening back to the truism, “there is strength in numbers,” or to the old working class slogan, “there is power in the union,” “there is strength in El Martillo.” Matt prefers the phrase, “El Martillo: the builder of bridges. The destroyer of walls.”

This entry was posted on Thursday, July 6th, 2023 at 10:30 pm and is filed under Literature, Media
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