Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lee Herrick's California

Mike Sonksen · Sunday, September 10th, 2023

> *Here, in my California, everywhere is Chinatown,*
>
> *everywhere is K-Town, everywhere is Armeniatown,*
> *everywhere a Little Italy. Less confederacy.*
>
> *No internment in the Valley.*

These lines quoted from Lee Herrick's 2012 poem, "My California," capture the inclusiveness and breadth of his award-winning poetics. An author of three books, the Korean American Herrick was appointed the California Poet Laureate in November 2022. He is the first Asian American to fill this role and Herrick has been doing readings up and down the state since shortly after he was chosen. "My California," is from Herrick's 2012 book, *Gardening Secrets of the Dead* and its magnanimous message has made it into an anthem apropos for a poet laureate.

I saw Herrick recite "My California" in Venice at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center on April 8th, 2023 and it moved the room like a holy prayer. Herrick lives in Fresno where he's taught at Fresno City College for the last 27 years. Similar to Langston Hughes in his "Let America Be America Again," poem, Herrick's California envisions the state in its greatest possible light promoting inclusion, farmers markets, family relationships and the power of poetry.



F. Douglas Brown, Lee Herrick and Michelle Brittan Rosado at Beyond Baroque

Herrick, like another great California poet, Lorna Dee Cervantes, knows the names of things. Cervantes's poem, "Know the Names of Things," meditates on the power of knowing correct names: "There is a way if you name / it. If you follow it the road / will come." In the last line Cervantes declares, "Know the names of things and heal." Cervantes instructs us all with this charge and Herrick does it better than just about anyone.

Herrick knows the names of cities, songs, specific food dishes, tree types, produce and countless

other details. His poems celebrate particulars: “Here, in my California / we fish out long noodles from the pho with such accuracy / you’d know we’d done this before.” To have such an all seeing eye is important especially for a poet representing 40 million diverse Californians. There is space in his work for everyone and he uses poetry to offer an alternative vision of how things can be. Herrick’s work combines the grace of Thich Nhat Hanh with the inclusive precision of Jonathan Gold. The poem continues:

> *In Fresno, we hope for less of the police state and more of a state of grace. / In my California, you can watch the sun go down / like in your California, on the ledge of the pregnant / twenty-second century, the one with a bounty of peaches and grapes, / red onions and the good salsa, wine and chapchae. / Here, in my California, paperbacks are free, / farmer’s markets are twenty four hours a day and / always packed, the trees and water have no nails in them, / the priests eat well, the homeless eat well.*

Herrick’s large capacity to remember others comes through whether one is reading his work or seeing him live. Before reciting “My California,” at Beyond Baroque, the first poem he shared was “Deliberate,” one of Amy Uyematsu’s best known. The pioneering Japanese American poet from Los Angeles was supposed to read also but she was not feeling well and unfortunately passed away on June 23, 2023, about two months later. Herrick spoke about discovering her work in 1992 at Borders Books and how her book, *30 Miles from J-Town* was a game changer. Herrick praised her wholeheartedly.

Another poem Herrick read was “Abecedarian Love Song for Street Food,” published in *Boom* in 2020. An abecedarian is a 26-line poem arranged alphabetically from A to Z and Herrick’s meticulously namechecks international street food. Below I quote the 12-line section from I to T because it shows his worldly acumen:

> *I once devoured a tlayuda in Oaxaca City, broke down*
> *just as the sunlight burst through the heart of a woman*
> *kissing her baby’s forehead by the plaza. When I say*
> *love, what I mean to say is I dream of you through disaster,*
> *malady, drought, or this nightmare anxiety pandemic.*
> *Now, even in this late dying, let us praise the 20,000*
> *open-hearted vendors in Bangkok and the glorious*
> *pupusas in San Salvador I ate on a bench near a dove.*
> *Quesadilla. Arepa. Tteokbokki. Hallelujah. The banh mi*
> *right on the outskirts of Hue, the chili pepper, the cilantro*
> *songs, praise the Zocalo saints who brought me*
> *to tears with a taco so full of music I almost wept.*

Herrick celebrates local food culture poetically with the same veracity as Jonathan Gold’s prose. Aside from reading his own work, he had two other stalwart California poets open up: Michelle Brittan Rosado and F. Douglas Brown. Rosado met Herrick in 2008 when she came to Fresno State for her MFA. They’ve read together many times in the city’s small but vibrant poetry community. For those that do not know, Fresno has quite a historic legacy of poets that includes Phillip Levine, Juan Felipe Herrera, Sara Borjas, Suzanne Lummis, Herrick, Brynn Saito and current Fresno Poet Laureate Joseph Rios. Herrick’s time organizing poetry events in Fresno prepared him for his current work.

Poetry Into Action

“Lee puts poetry into action, so he’s a natural pick for our new poet laureate,” Rosado states. Among dozens of events together, she remembers “a poetry reading fundraiser he organized for Japan following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, and how it felt to read alongside so many local poets, and the collective sentiments of grief mixed with hope.” Currently in Long Beach, Rosado grew up in Vacaville, halfway between the Bay Area and Sacramento. She read a poem about how Vacaville’s rural landscape shaped her. After earning her MFA in Fresno she came to USC to get her Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing.

“Reading with Lee and Doug at Beyond Baroque,” Rosado declares, “was a powerful reminder of poetry’s ability to connect people — through our poems that dealt with family and community and origins, as well as the conversations afterward and discovering what and who connects us as creatives in California.”

F. Douglas Brown studied with Herrick in the Kundiman Workshop a decade ago. The Long Beach based Brown was born in Hunters Point San Francisco and he read a cycle of poems from his forthcoming book. His five poems were communiques to his deceased mother who passed away a few years ago. The poems meditated on records they listened to together that were touchstones in their relationship.

Brown is also a DJ and he recited the poems consecutively like a mixtape with smooth transitions between each. Composed intentionally as his way of communicating with his mother in her absence, the bricolage of his poetry quoting short phrases from foundational songs made a poignant vehicle to help him work through the grief and despair of losing her. These themes in Brown’s poems resonate with Lee Herrick and his California on multiple levels.

Case in point is another one of Lee Herrick’s best known poems is “How Music Stays in the Body,” from his 2019 book, *Scar and Flower*. Herrick wrote the piece to his Korean mother who he has never met. Though Herrick was born in Seoul, South Korea, he was adopted at 10 months old and spent his formative years in Danville, California in the Bay Area growing up with a white family. The poem reflects on what his Korean mother must be like and how her absence shaped him. The poem’s longing and lament reflect Herrick’s deep emotional capacity. Here’s a key excerpt; “I’ve been told Mothers don’t forget the body. / I can’t remember your face, the shape or story, / or how you held me the day I was born, so / I write a thousand poems to survive.”

Herrick knows that poetry is an alchemical force. *Scar and Flower* begins with an epigraph from bell hooks’ *All About Love, New Visions* that states: “What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands.” The 51 poems in the book are divided into two sections: 1) Scar, and 2) Flower. The two sections work like a before and after. The before includes tragedies from both current events and his own life and the after is what he hopes can happen and how he found a way to survive and thrive in spite of it all: “We complicated it all. / We were flattened with options. / We forgot our own fabric, / the miracles in our simple hands.”

In a 2018 interview with *A Normal School* Herrick states that the book “deals with gun violence, trauma, and how we manage it.” The last poem of the book is about him watching his daughter read on the couch. He wants to remind her that “if she forgets where her heart is,” “there is a pulse in every book, / how looking down into the open page / reminds us of prayer, / the next night of restoration, / the light around her body.” Herrick uses poetry to bring light and like bell hooks, his

work offers a refuge, a new vision of what can be possible. To my mind, Herrick's an intersection of Thich Nhat Hanh and Jonathan Gold with his deep compassion and ability to reach into the heart of the community.

Poetry Inciting Civic Engagement



Lynne Thompson, Mike Sonksen and Lee Herrick

Three weeks after the Beyond Baroque event on April 29th, Herrick and F. Douglas Brown read together again, this time accompanied by Los Angeles Poet Laureate Lynne Thompson. Held at the Pico Union Library just down the street from where Brown teaches English at Loyola High School, several local middle school students read with the laureates.

Located just west of Downtown and east of Koreatown, Pico Union has been one of the most low income Los Angeles districts over the last four decades, but the area is also one of the city's most vibrant, known for its large Central American population. In addition to the large Salvadoran and Mexican populations there are sizable enclaves of Nicaraguans, Hondurans and Koreans in the area. The event was groundbreaking because the brick building housing the library was recently revitalized after falling into disrepair for many years.

Held on one of National Poetry Month's final days, the well attended event organized by Brown and Aurora Corona—the Pico Union Neighborhood Council Secretary—was the first poetry event held there since the library's clean up. The event was called "Poetry Lives in Pico Union," and Brown started the day quoting poet Quincy Troupe, "poetry is the living language of the community."

Corona's invitation to Herrick and Thompson to make the kick off celebration extra special punctuated Troupe's idea of poetry. Besides the reading, there was a resource fair that included

representatives from Assemblymember Miguel Santiago and the state librarian's respective offices, tables staffed by local nonprofit organizations, afterschool programs, a taquero providing free lunch, a DJ mixing tunes and smiles everywhere.

By the time Herrick read his "Abecedarian Love Song for Street Food," the crowd felt honored and cheered loudly, especially when he mentioned eating pupusas in San Salvador. Dozens of Salvadoran residents in the audience felt seen by Herrick when he mentioned their traditional dish. Lynne Thompson read poems dedicated to her Caribbean parents. The 8 local students reading poems from the nearby Equitas Academy, punctuated it all the more.

Besides being an award winning poet, Brown's been teaching at Loyola for 15 years while leading the school's Office of Equity and Inclusion. Events like this reading are how he is reimagining Loyola's Center for Service and Justice. He was thrilled to connect Loyola and the local library. This was the first of what he hopes to be many more. The senior librarian and neighborhood council members said a few words offering their gratitude.



Loyola High School is Southern California's oldest continuously run educational institution and it has always been one of the region's most elite schools. Nonetheless, Loyola is in West Pico Union and with its large gates and monumental buildings, it looks more like an isolated fortress. In recent years though, they have evolved into becoming more involved with their neighbors. This began in earnest over the last decade as Brown's colleague Dr. Jesse Rodriguez felt the school could do more to connect to the neighborhood. As the enclave's largest employer, Loyola is starting to recognize its responsibility in the community.

Loyola students are participating as advocates now, some have even built websites for local businesses and several Loyola students assist at the Pico Union library. Loyola students are even

assisting Corona on the Pico Union Neighborhood Council which is instrumental in ensuring all Loyola students take community walks. These walks help students engage with the community in meaningful and sustaining ways instead of simply being “service tourists.”

Such intergenerational and multicultural civic engagement honoring community development, youth empowerment and building bridges with poetry is the spirit of Lee Herrick’s California. In the final segment of the reading, Herrick read “My California,” while announcing a new statewide project he’s launching this Fall in partnership with the California Arts Council called “Our California.”

“I will invite all Californians (any age, any level of poetry writing experience, documented or undocumented) to submit an unpublished poem about their town, city, or state as they see it, what they love about it or what they would change about it,” Herrick recently told me via email. “My hope is to encourage Californians to write a poem and also to see poetry as a way of creating social change or inspiring civic engagement.” All the poems will be posted on the California Arts Council website.

As the Pico Union Library reading concluded, the youth poets received Certificates of Achievement from the City of Los Angeles and local Councilmember Eunisses Hernandez just before F. Douglas Brown engaged the crowd in a joyful call and response chant that repeated: “Poetry Lives in Pico Union!” Lynne Thompson and Herrick took photos with the poets while graciously signing books. With Herrick as the laureate, California will keep National Poetry Month alive all year round because poetry lives everywhere and belongs to everyone.

This entry was posted on Sunday, September 10th, 2023 at 5:51 pm and is filed under Essay, Poetry, Community
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.