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# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Reflecting on the National Day on Writing

Mike Sonksen · Tuesday, October 26th, 2021

For the last dozen years, October 20th has been the day America has celebrated [the National Day on Writing](#). I've been hosting poetry events for it dating back to October 2011 when I first learned about the occasion. This year over the course of 48 hours from October 18th to the 20th, I hosted three poetry events and visited former Los Angeles Poet Laureate [Luis J. Rodriguez](#) to commemorate the day. We did two events honoring the National Day on Writing on October 19th because of scheduling and logistical reasons. And though for so many of us every day is the National Day on Writing, I'd like to take time here to celebrate a constellation of poets, writers, students and professors who tirelessly give themselves to promote writing and fellowship around the spoken and written word.

In the Fall of 2011 I was beginning graduate school at Cal State LA after a 14-year gap from graduating UCLA in 1997. The time between the two schools was spent freelance writing, teaching and giving city tours as a tour guide. More than anything though, I had hosted countless open mics dating back to 97-98, Hosting open mics has played a major role in my development as a writer. I enjoy sharing space with other writers and it's amazing how many writers got their start from going to open mics. Therefore it was only natural that when I started grad school, I would host on campus open mics with both undergraduate and graduate students alike. I instantly found two professors who supported the cause: Dr. Lauri Scheyer and Dr. Christopher Harris.







*National Day on Writing*

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**OPEN MIC EVENT**

**Guest MC: Mike “The Poet” Sonksen**  
*featuring Sesshu Foster,*  
 Stevie Kalinich, Michael C. Ford, Nicole Favors,  
 Rosalinda Flores, Joshua Jones, Alejandra Medina,  
 Liang Yujing, and Luo Jian

Register Now to  
 JOIN US via Zoom on  
**OCT. 19th, 7PM - 8:30PM**

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Brought to you by:

**Statement Magazine**      Cal State LA English Department

Hunan Normal University British and American Poetry Center and Foreign Studies College

## How It All Started

The first open mic I hosted at Cal State LA was celebrating the National Day on Writing a decade back. The date was October 20th, 2011. We set up shop next to the Engineering & Technology Building on the southeast side of the Cal State LA campus, adjacent to a large tree. Besides the microphone and speakers, we had a massive bulletin-board where people could pin a short musing they wrote on one of the index cards we had that were cut out into the shape of leaves. We were assembling a tree of knowledge so to speak.

Dr. Harris and Dr. Scheyer were the faculty advisors sponsoring the event and I have worked countless times with them both ever since. Even though I graduated with my M.A. in 2014, we have done annual events together for the National Day on Writing at Cal State LA just about every year over the last decade. I recently asked Dr. Harris about the longer backstory behind the day.

“The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) established the National Day on Writing in 2009, so I always connect the holiday, now officially celebrated on October 20th, as something President Obama initiated,” Dr. Harris says. “The day is a day to reflect on the impact that writing has on our lives, and I’d argue that today, in our digitally-mediated world, writing has an ever-

growing impact on our lives.”

To Dr. Harris writing is everything. He is Cal State LA’s inaugural Faculty Director of Writing Across the Curriculum. Over the last decade he has also collaborated closely with Dr. Lauri Scheyer, a distinguished English Professor, author and longtime faculty advisor of *Statement*, Cal State LA’s literary magazine now entering its 71st year. I served as a Co-Editor of *Statement* for three years and we did a lot of on campus events with poets of all ages. The spirit of these events were heavily informed by Dr. Lauri Scheyer.

Dr. Scheyer specializes in helping students explore and affirm their values through writing. She has inspired my own teaching practice because she is a bridge builder and someone that has built community through poetry for many years at multiple universities. She’s authored several books including the acclaimed, *A History of African American Poetry*. For the last few years Dr. Scheyer has also been a Distinguished Professor at the Hunan Normal University in China. Through the course of the pandemic, we have collaborated on Zoom events with her students in China, more on this shortly.

## Filipino American History Month at the Cerritos Library

First I want to mention one event from this last week leading up to the National Day on Writing. On Monday night, October 18th the Cerritos Millennium Library featured Allan Aquino and Barbara Jane Reyes on Zoom for Filipino American History Month. Cerritos has a large Filipino population and Aquino and Reyes are two premier Filipino American poets. Pedro Orellana, the librarian at the Cerritos Library advocated for the event and we started planning the reading almost a year ago. I served as the event’s MC but had two student poets introduce the features. The former Mayor of Cerritos Mark Pulido was on the call, as was current councilman Frank Aurelio Yokoyama. Yokoyama said a few words before the poets read and how grateful he was to be celebrating the occasion with everyone.

To begin the event, my former student from Woodbury University, Adriel Navarro, read a poem he wrote in my class last year and then introduced Allan Aquino. Adriel grew up in Historic Filipinotown and though he majored in Architecture and just graduated, he’s a dynamite poet also. He read a poem about how he got his name and it served as the perfect introduction for Allan. Allan read two poems and shared some little known history about Filipino American culture.

# Poetry Reading

FILIPINO AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH



## Allan Aquino

is a poet and professor of Asian American Studies at California State University, Northridge. He has an MA degree in Asian American Studies from UCLA, where he was a recipient of a Graduate Fellowship award. Allan is the former president of the Filipino American National Historical Society (Los Angeles Chapter) and a founding member of the Larry Itliong Foundation through Education. His scholarship focuses upon Asian Pacific American history, media, contemporary issues, pop culture and literary arts.

## Barbara Jane Reyes

is the author of "Letters to a Young Brown Girl." She was born in Manila, Philippines and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her other works include "Gravities of Center," "Poeta en San Francisco," "Diwata," "To Love as Aswang," and "Invocation to Daughters." Her seventh book, "Wanna Peek Into My Notebook?: Notes on Pinay Liminality," is forthcoming from Paloma Press in 2022. An Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow, she received her B.A. in Ethnic Studies at U.C. Berkeley and her M.F.A. at San Francisco State University. She is an adjunct professor at University of San Francisco's Yuchengco Philippine Studies Program.



photo credit Peter Dressel

**Monday, Oct. 18 • 7-8 p.m. via Zoom**

Register now at [cerritoslibrary.beanstack.org](https://cerritoslibrary.beanstack.org)

**ALL AGES**

In celebration of Filipino American History Month, poets Allan Aquino and Barbara Jane Reyes will read selections of their poetry. This night of celebration will be moderated by Mike Sonksen (Mike the Poet).

 **CERRITOS LIBRARY** 18025 Bloomfield Avenue, Cerritos CA 90703

Following Allan's reading we had the Whitney High School senior Amber Wang introduce Barbara Jane Reyes. Amber participated in a Zoom poetry workshop I led last year and wrote such a strong piece that day that we ended up publishing it. Amber read a poem inspired by Barbara's latest book, *Letters To A Young Brown Girl*. Barbara read several poems including a few from her next book that will be coming out in 2022. Reyes has published several books over the last 15 years and she has inspired countless writers with her bold, direct work. A decade ago Vickie Vertiz and Kenji Liu put her work on my radar. Needless to say, Allan and Barbara were powerful presenters of their work.

Councilman Yokoyama was so inspired that he is giving both featured poets award certificates from the City of Cerritos. Members of the audience were also impressed with the student poets. It is this intergenerational exchange that makes poetry and writing such a bridge building activity. The day after the event, Barbara Jane Reyes shared a link to Amber Wang's response poem and then said, "If you want to know who's got next, who's coming up in APIA Poetry, please read this

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and know that, friends, the kids are alright.” I agree with Barbara and see this brilliance in student poets everywhere I go.

## **Verse Come, Verse Serve**

The following day at lunchtime I was at “[Verse Come, Verse Serve](#),” the open mic my students and I started at Woodbury University three years ago. We host it every other Tuesday from 12:15 to 1PM. Many Woodbury students are in majors like Animation, Architecture, Fashion Design, Film, Game Design, Graphic Design and Management and some do not even know they like writing until they take a class with my colleague [Dr. Linda Dove](#) or me. Dr. Dove shows them how writing is central in just about everything we do.

I like to have students write about their own family stories as it connects to history and geography and through this process, many of them realize the joy of writing and celebrating their own story. In this way poetry can be like service learning, because students often become more civically engaged in their local area after writing about their neighborhoods. This happens because as they start to write and explore their worlds more, they want to take greater stewardship in the future of their local geographies. People are prone to protect what they love so the act of getting to know your own geography is a method to inspire students to take more agency in their own lives around their local environment.



# TODAY:

Let's celebrate the  
NATIONAL DAY  
ON WRITING!!

VERSE  
*come*  
VERSE  
*serve*



# OPENMIKE

SPECIAL VENUE:::  
AHMANSON at 12:15 PM



“Verse Come, Verse Serve” is a jam session and over the years we have converted students like [Avery McDougal](#) to the joy of writing. Similar to Adriel Navarro mentioned above, McDougal is a standout student in architecture that’s also written some phenomenal poems in my class over the last few years. The connection between poetry and architecture makes sense, because poetry itself involves design, arrangement and the architecture of language.

Besides the poetry from Woodbury students, “Verse Come, Verse Serve,” is also entertaining because a few other professors and even the Dean of Woodbury’s College of Liberal Arts, [Dr. Reuben Ellis](#) always bring poems. Sometimes Dr. Ellis will read a classic from one of his favorite poets and other times, he will share one of his own. Dr. Linda Dove, a Woodbury Writing Professor and the advisor of [Moria](#), Woodbury’s Literary Magazine, will always recite her latest too. The spirit is about having a good time and it’s infectious for all who are present. Folks that may have been initially hesitant realize that they can do it too, especially when they see their fellow students or even a professor share a poem.

Over the last three years our student hosts have been Aspen Leavitt, [Laila Cooke-Campbell](#) and [Joshua Jones](#). On Tuesday October 19th, we had really thoughtful poems read by [Nicole Favors](#) and [Jay KLM](#). “Verse Come, Verse Serve,” has become an important on campus event and the community we’ve built has improved campus unity. On Tuesday, October 19th this spirit reflected beautifully.

## Culture as Healing at Tia Chuchas

Right after “Verse Come, Verse Serve,” I took a short drive from Burbank to Sylmar to visit former Los Angeles Poet Laureate, Luis J. Rodriguez at [Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural](#), the bookstore, gallery and performance space he started 20 years ago with his wife, Trini Rodriguez. They recently moved into a bigger site and will be celebrating their 20th anniversary with a big gathering sometime somewhat soon after the pandemic subsides. I had been meaning to come to see the new space for a few weeks and I am always inspired every time I see Luis and visit Tia Chuchas. For Luis J. Rodriguez, culture promotes healing and he has always used reading as a tool to survive. This is why he and Trini started Tia Chuchas 20 years ago.

In addition to having an inspiring conversation with Luis, I bought a copy of [The Essential June Jordan](#) from Tia Chuchas’ well stocked bookshelves. The opening quote from Jordan’s book connects to The National Day on Writing and also to Luis Rodriguez and Tia Chuchas. Jordan states: “Poetry is a political action undertaken for the sake of information, the faith, the exorcism, and the lyrical invention, that telling the truth makes possible. Poetry means taking control of the language of your life.”

Rodriguez’s own career has mirrored the late Jordan’s because they both have used poetry for four plus decades to empower young people to take control of the language of their lives and to give voice to the voiceless. Luis has taught poetry workshops in prisons for over 40 years and his work is grounded in the ethic of restorative justice. Moreover, when Luis was the Los Angeles Poet Laureate, he visited every single branch of the City of Los Angeles’s Library system and did well over 150 events a year during his time as LA’s laureate. Rodriguez had already been doing this for many years, but in his role as the city’s official poet, he got to do it even bigger. Rodriguez is the very embodiment of a poet who uses poetry as a social practice.

While catching up with Luis, we spoke about how the pandemic has caused so many of us to return to the basics and take care of the day to day household activities of life like the dishes and cooking with your family. Luis spoke about his longtime friend [Jack Kornfield](#), who mentioned Luis's work in restorative justice in the book, *The Wise Heart*. Kornfield has written several titles and another one of his best known is the acclaimed tome, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*.

The point of this title is that as one embarks upon the road to enlightenment and even finds brief moments of attaining it, one needs to remember the day to day activities like doing the laundry. For Rodriguez it means even when he shares the stage with the mayor, Father Greg Boyle or some international luminary, he never forgets the little things whether it be household duties, a quiet dinner with his wife or staying close with his family. Rodriguez has used his daily practice as a writer to empower others and light a path towards redemption. Visiting Tia Chuchas and hearing his philosophy and humble words that afternoon provided a powerful meditation in regards to the National Day on Writing.

## Zooming with Poets from 10 to 94

After I left Tia Chuchas, I hopped on the 210 east to the 5 south to go home and host a Zoom reading for Cal State LA and the National Day on Writing later that evening. Once again I found myself with Dr. Scheyer and Dr. Harris. We ended up having a Zoom event of 21 writers with ages ranging from 10 to 94. We had Dr. Scheyer's 10-year old grandson Max, five writers from China zooming in, a dozen students from both graduate and undergraduate levels and 94-year old [Ed Wilcox](#).

Wilcox was one of the original editors of *Statement Magazine* in 1950-51 when the journal first started. Cal State LA was then located where LA City College is now and it was called LA State back in those days. Ed is a wise man who grew up in Burbank and still writes every single day. At 94, he is more alive than many people half his age. A few years ago he did an internet search and discovered that *Statement* was still running. He got in touch with Dr. Scheyer and he's now a consultant for the current group of editors working on the next issue.

The featured poet for our Zoom event was [Sesshu Foster](#) who only read two poems because he had a commitment to hang with his daughter before she left town the next morning. Besides Cal State LA students like Alejandra Medina, Juan Lopez and Rachel Galvan, we had inspiring poems from the Beach Boys songwriter [Stevie Kalinich](#), and impassioned readings from Joshua Jones and [Christopher Siders](#).

The eclectic mix of writers from all over the world epitomized the egalitarian spirit that the National Day on Writing stands for. Dr. Scheyer expressed it like this, "With COVID-19, we all need community more than ever and there are even fewer opportunities for close and compassionate international dialogue. We're in a world where tolerance and kindness are essential and tonight's event—in a seamless and natural way—brought people together of different ages, races, genders, nationalities, cultures. Poetry humanizes and creates lasting connections and understanding, and we saw it happen tonight."

In the same spirit that governs this website, the National Day on Writing promotes self expression and communion between citizens and artists. Reading and writing, as June Jordan states, helps practitioners take control of the language of their lives while encouraging us all to listen to each

other on a deeper level. Writing is the perfect outlet to build these bridges and create stronger connections. Here's to all the writers and venues mentioned above and everyone out there reading this and doing their part to find more humanity and improve our communication with one another. Let's make every day the National Day on Writing.

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