

“All. art. is. political:” An interview with Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales

Our two featured poems for the month are selections from Roy G. Guzmán and Miguel M. Morales’s anthology, *Pulse/Pulso: In Remembrance of Orlando*. Here, WBT editor Andria Williams interviews the two editors about this unique, gorgeous, and necessary passion project. As Morales describes,

The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

ANDRIA WILLIAMS: Roy, one entry point into this discussion might be to start with your 2016 poem, [“Restored Mural for Orlando.”](#) The poem is beautiful and gutting. You have a masterful way of building the emotional investment with each turn, opening with the shooting itself, and then moving into a fond, pragmatic, and even tenderly humorous portrait of your family on vacation in Orlando. On that trip, you reflect that Orlando is where kids go to “fantasize about the childhood [they] didn’t have;” you’re surprised by the sight of your mother on a rollercoaster (“because she’s always been ashamed of her weight”), and note somewhat humorously that your parents ended up “buying a timeshare by mistake/ not really by mistake...”

As a non-poet but a fiction writer, I was simply impressed by the way you allow the “character” of yourself to guide us through the poem, which somehow, almost counter-intuitively, increases the intensity.

Can you talk a little more about the myth of Orlando for you, as a child, and how this mythos worked its way into your thoughts about the tragedy?

ROY G. GUZMÁN: First of all, thank you for your generous reading of my poem and, as a fiction writer, for noticing these rich aspects about the poem. I think one of the most important things I had to negotiate during the writing this poem was my position in all of this. I kept returning to that image of the club, to the colors, to what the victims and survivors might have been wearing, to the sounds. Those sensory details invited me into that space, but I had to figure out what I'd be doing in the reimagining of that space. I had to turn the gaze on myself. That is when a lot of these autobiographical details suddenly became important to my approach to the poem. I had to honor the victims and I had to be as clear as possible about my relationship to Orlando. As someone who grew up in Florida, I was affected in so many ways.



Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Roy G. Guzmán.

The mythos of Orlando was important for me to talk about. I can't remember how many times my friends and I would just drive up from Miami and stay in a hotel and do all kinds of stupid things. Most of us were teenagers. I probably went to Orlando a few times before I even set foot in Disney World. The timeshare event affected my family and me greatly. I'd just gotten my first job out of college and I wanted to treat my parents to something meaningful. I remember being in the info session for that timeshare and running all kinds of figures in my head to possibly work out this possibility. Obviously, I was naive and the people running the info session took advantage of that with false promises. Till this day my mom tells my stepdad and me that she never wanted to sign that contract, that we pushed her to. And she's right.

2) AW:

In “Restored Mural for Orlando,” you write:

“I am afraid of attending places
that celebrate our bodies because that’s also where our bodies
have been cancelled / when you’re brown & gay you’re always
dying
twice”

What was the particular importance to you of publishing an anthology – specifically of Latinx and LGBTQ+ writers – about the shooting?

In their poem “straight partner of ten years and anyone else,” Nicole Oquendo writes,

“do not erase my grief. there is a galaxy of this
spreading out inside my chest.”

Did you feel that the stories, the grief, of members of your community were not being heard in the aftermath of the shooting?

RG: We were totally not being heard. We still aren’t. It’s appalling how that’s always the case when tragedies affect marginalized communities. Again and again we see scholars and researchers build careers out of Black and brown pain, and whatever money they make hardly ever makes it back to our communities. This year, for instance, marked the second anniversary of the massacre. Instead of promoting queer and trans voices of color that responded with care and tact, most of the writing community decided to promote another cis white writer and what they’ve written about others’ pain or how they want to make the world a better place. I’m tired of this pattern. It’s enough to make me feel cynical. But we’re told to shut up and be grateful we’re still alive. That’s what the writers in this anthology are trying to resist.

MIGUEL M. MORALES: Pulse affected us all in ways we'll be discovering for years to come. QTPOC weren't being heard before the shooting, in the aftermath, or even today. But just because we aren't being heard doesn't mean our voices aren't out there.

QTPOC communities across the country immediately felt connected to the shooting because so many times we've been relegated to the occasional "Latin Night" and even then, those spaces are filled with others trying to exoticize or fetishize us. No matter how comfortable we try to make those spaces, we are still being policed, attacked, and victimized. But through it all, we always – *always* – have each other. Honestly, it hurt to see so many commemorations of Pulse exclude our voices but we did what we always do, we buried our dead and made our own space. That's what we wanted to convey with *Pulse/Pulso*, we have each other.

3) AW: Miguel, I know that you grew up in Texas and worked as a migrant farmworker beginning quite early in your childhood, that you lead writing workshops for farmworkers in Missouri and Kansas, and that you're also an accomplished poet and fiction writer. Can you talk about how you initially connected with Roy to work on the *Pulse/Pulso* anthology, and about your own passion for the project?)



Pulse/Pulso editor and poet, Miguel M. Morales.

MM: I followed Roy on social media, but we didn't interact much. Not long after the Pulse shooting, my friend and poetry sister, Sarah A. Chavez, asked if I knew Roy because he had a piece about Pulse that was going viral on the internet. It was "Restored Mural for Orlando" and I didn't even finish reading it before I sent him a message thanking him for the piece. We began chatting and I shared with him how I wished someone would put together an anthology of brown queer voices

responding to Pulse. That's when he said a press approached him about doing that very thing. He said he was wary because he wasn't sure how much he could commit to it because he was in school. But, like me, he wanted something to happen. I'm not sure who brought up the collaboration first but it was obvious that we were meant to work on this together.

Many of us endured sustained losses of loved ones during the AIDS crisis of the '90s. Some of us have never come to terms with those losses. I didn't want that to happen with Pulse. All I could think about in those first hours and days after the shooting were of the names of the victims. I wasn't prepared for how similar they would look and sound to the names of people I loved. I had to do something even if it was simply to encourage/nag/beg action from more accomplished Latinx writers. As with most forms of activism and leadership, it didn't come down to big names. It came down to us.

Everyone in this book stepped up when presented with the opportunity to honor the victims. Each of us relied on family, friends, and strangers for help. The enduring legacy of Pulse and of the lives lost is not of grief but of gratitude for the communities that sprung up across the country in the aftermath. The pieces in Pulse/Pulso came from the initial days and months after the shooting. We needed to hold and sanctify those moments so we could have each moment that followed. So we could feel love and pride again. That is the passion I had and still have for this project.

4) AW: I love the variety of the poems in Pulse/Pulso; some are quiet and sad; others, like Maya Chinchilla's "Church at Night," has moments that I would love to hear performed out loud ("Queerly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life...") How did you decide how and where to place the pieces? Did an order reveal itself as you were editing, or was it more like fitting puzzle pieces together at the end?

RG: The organization of the anthology felt very natural in how it came together. As we accepted pieces, we'd add them to a file. I remember mixing a lot of these pieces and not thinking much about order. What was interesting is when Miguel and I came back to the document, months later, and found that somehow the order we'd put the work in worked. We came up with a lot of reasons for why Chinchilla's "Church at Night" would go where it ended up and, for instance, why Chen's work appears where it does. I'd like to believe something greater than us helped us with that order.

MM: I don't remember us officially having to plan out the order, much less have a disagreement on the pieces we selected. It's easy for editing teams to agree on which pieces make it into a collection. What really tests the team is when they come to pieces on which they disagree. I was waiting for us to have that disagreement but it didn't happen. I think that's because we stayed focused on honoring Pulse and while there are some pieces I wish had made it into the collection, I'm extremely happy with what we curated.

From the beginning, Roy and I worked to have our submissions include new, emerging, and established QTPOC voices. We worked even harder to make sure those voices filled the anthology. Of course we had to examine those terms because someone like Joe Jimenez is seen as emerging but many of us in the community know Joe as an established voice. And since we put out the call in 2016, some of the people who submitted have since become important and emerging voices. We also included writers who have never submitted work anywhere. Including them was essential to the tone of what we wanted to reflect. I'm so proud of everyone who submitted work whether it made it into the anthology or not. They all helped shape *Pulse/Pulso* into what it is.



5) AW: Julia Leslie Guarch's poem, "Shh. Shh. Be Quiet" uses

the last text messages of victim Eddie Jamoldroy Justice, sent to his mother as he hid from the shooter in a bathroom. ("Mommy I love you./ He's coming. Im going to die.") The effect is brutal. But such messages have also become familiar, as one public shooting after another rocks the US. How do you think Orlando fits into the larger discussion of gun violence in this country?

MM: It is clear that so many of us, especially QTPOC, are not safe living our lives, telling our stories, dancing in clubs, shopping, walking, driving, standing, sitting, praying, laughing, or breathing. Gun violence is the focus of so many these days due to the immediate and imminent threat of death that it poses, and it should be. We have to shut that shit down. Gun violence is violence.

The Pulse shooting is just another example, though a rare and extreme one, of the violence queer people, especially queer/trans people of color, face daily. Violence against us is dismissed by the authorities and eventually even by ourselves. Trans women are being slaughtered. Our vulnerable queer youth and queer elderly face violence and threats by those who are supposed to take care of them. We are targeted for sexual violence and other forms of sexual assault that go unreported, unacknowledged, and unrecognized.

In some places queer people are not legally safe in our workplaces or walking down the street or using a public restroom or in our homes. And even in the places where we are legally protected, we're still not safe.

I am not attempting to dismiss the loss of the 49 lives and the injuries of the 53 others that happened on June 12, 2016. I'm saying that our survival is much larger than gun violence. If we only focus on bullets, we ignore the beatings, the bashings, the bullying, and hundreds of other ways the blood of LGBTQIA+ people is spilled every moment of everyday. Ignoring these forms of "everyday" violence gave permission to

perpetrate the violence that happened at Pulse.

6) AW: Roy, in an interview in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, you have said, "[Intersections of identity] are something that unfortunately in the U.S. [do] not get to exist simultaneously. Either people want you to wave the immigrant flag and that's it, or wave the student flag, or wave the poet flag, and a lot of institutions prevent people from having all these different identities coexist. And for me it's like, because I exist, I exist already within all these different identities."

Can you speak a little more about this? Do you have any insights into how this problem might have developed, and whether any progress is on the horizon?

RG: Thank you for bringing me back to what I said in that interview—for which I remain grateful. I just got back from a research trip in Honduras, so a lot of what I experienced there is going to speak to how I respond to these particular questions. I find that a system built on colonization, classification, surveillance, torture, and power is going to want to control and stratify identity. Although I noticed these problems in Honduras, in a place like the United States, where people care so much about individuality and wealth, you can't have layers of gray. Complexity isn't valued because American society wants the world to speak only American English. Privilege isn't recognized when people obfuscate different levels of hardship. Something that gives me lots of joy is seeing Black women, for instance, run their own successful businesses. But immigrants, at least those from Central America, are still treated like disposables. Our laws continue to see us as barbaric, social leeches, and unable to govern ourselves. The progress I want to see happen has truly yet to come.

7) AW: Miguel, you had a fantastic poem, "This is a Migrant Poem," a couple of years back in Vol. 29 of *The Green*

Mountains Review.

"This poem is a gift of a strong back, of sturdy legs,
of silence, of patience.

And a never-ending work ethic
a never ending work ethic
a never ending work of ethics."

We are, as a nation, failing to deal ethically with people trying to enter this country, and now are being led by an administration that seems obsessed with and increasingly hostile to immigrants altogether. Can you talk a little about your understanding of the "zero-tolerance" policy, the effects you've seen? Has it been hard to keep writing and making art in a national climate that's this openly hostile, or do you feel that the hostility has always been there and it's only the openness that has changed?

MM: I grew up in Texas but I live in Kansas. While the first is a border state, the second acts like it is. They are remarkably similar in their geography and in their approach to immigration and to those they regard as "others." Kansas is one of the states receiving migrant children forcibly separated from their parents at the southern U.S. border. Like any other community we are doing our best to keep eyes and ears on these children, hold each other up, and push back against those who advocate for this monstrous policy and shame the cowards who keep silent.

Because hate and hostility have always been there, and will always be there, the Latinx community has learned to pick and choose its battles. Though now we're facing what we thought was far behind us – emboldened, willful, vile ignorance and an increase in extreme anti-brown violence. As an artist, it's hard to find the moments to create in this environment. But I came of age in the AIDS activism of the 90s and that

oppressive, destructive, and deadly time gave us some of the most powerful and creative moments in queer history. That's the challenge Latinx artists, and all artists, face in these exponential series of crises. We're also learning to embrace our anger and our rage. We're channeling it into something positive.

8) AW: Miguel, in a 2014 blog post, after the Ferguson riots in St. Louis, you wrote

"... there is... beauty in pain. We ... have a gift and sometimes that gift requires sitting in our pain, processing it, and putting it through the artist's lens.

It means taking what's inside our hearts, inside our heads and on our tongues and putting it in words, on canvas, or in clay – that's our ability, our gift. It's our super power. In doing so, we can help others process their feelings. We can stand as examples to young people on creative ways to deal with these difficult emotions that make so many turn to, and live in, rage or to simply shut down."

I'd like to close with [both of] your thoughts on what it means to write with a political consciousness. What does political art achieve when it is doing what it does best?

MM: All. art. is. political.

People who say otherwise speak from a place of invested privilege where their politics are so deeply inherent that their positions are seen as default and apolitical. Those individuals are deluding themselves and desperately want to conscript you into any and all efforts sanctioning that delusion.

For me, art has the most impact when it meets and merges with activism. As artists, we are tasked with holding a mirror up to society. We reflect its darkness as well as its beauty.

Right now, in this moment, we have an abundance of both. Every artist strives for the apex of creativity. We are there. We are standing in a vulnerable sacred space that comes along once in a generation. We just have to be bold.

RG: I've been writing poetry consistently for about 6-7 years, though I've been reading it for much longer than that. Most of my first poems primarily came from restlessness and a need to heal. I'm not sure how much has changed for me since. I think the best art operates between imminence, urgency, and compassion, as the works in this anthology claim. However, I strongly believe that any kind of embodiment must begin away from the page. If you are not doing the work your words claim you do, then it's hard for that work to connect with readers. It's hard for you to even connect with what you're talking about. I'm not implying that fiction writers engage in fiction because they themselves can't do the work urged by their words; on the contrary, the best fiction does not come from the "best gaze" but from the best embodiment of those words. You can't claim community if you've never provided community for others. If we are saying that all art is political, what we are also saying is that our words carry all kinds of responsibilities and possibilities.

One time I met with author Jeanette Winterson and she said that anything she writes, regardless of the genre, is an extension of herself, a preoccupation she wants to unpack, the self wanting to grow and learn.

I think about that often. How do we want to grow? What are we consuming? When will you be ready to give back?