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"across and thru"+"this mean time": Aryanil Mukherjee, Kimberly Alidio, and the Interdisciplinary Lens – Iris A. Law

One of the joys of editing *Lantern Review* is that Mia (our Associate Editor) and I get to work with contributors from a wide variety of backgrounds. We've published work by people who are just venturing out into the world of poetry, as well as work by veterans who have many books and awards to their names.

We also work with artists who are invested in many different career paths: some are academics—students or teachers by day; others are publishers, community organizers, nonprofit administrators, designers, engineers, computer programmers, ceramists. Some of our contributors have graduate degrees in creative writing; others have degrees in non-literary fields; still others have taken an entirely different, nonacademic path.

There's a beautifully dizzying array of interests and experiences that populates each issue, and every time Mia and I sit down for one of our Skype editorial meetings, mugs of tea in hand and a new batch of poems queued up on our respective computer screens, we're blown away by the diversity of perspectives that our contributors have to offer.

As an editor, I love thinking about the conversation between the different voices in each issue. And I love the way that each contributor's unique experiences sometimes produce subtle, but wonderfully resonant nuances within his or her work.

In my own academic experience, I didn't start out wanting to be a poet. In fact, I spent a lot of time in college investing in a deep fascination with biology. But even when I eventually bailed on that interest to pursue the literary arts, the science didn't disappear. Instead, it tagged along with me to the humanities, where xylem and phloem, equations and electrons, carrying capacities, helices, and wavelengths continue to populate my creative work. And so, in my work as an editor—while I ultimately believe that it is not the route that one takes, but the poems themselves, that matter—I'm always deeply interested in the work of poets who have non-humanities or interdisciplinary backgrounds.

Take, for example, one of my favorite poems from our second issue, "[honeycomb scriptures :: world granulated](#)," which was contributed by Aryanil Mukherjee, a Cincinnati-based engineering mathematician who has published nine books of poetry and edits the interlingual publication *KAURAB*.

The poems in Mukherjee's "honeycomb scriptures" series engage with encapsulation, compartmentalization, refraction, bifurcation . . . and it's the lovely strangeness of this lens which permeates and enlivens ". . . world granulated." In entering the poem, the reader is presented with an array of images that act like tiny mirrors—some planar, some concave or convex—which reflect and translate, fragment, distort, split and twin the bodies that pass before them: "two gloved men carrying a sheet of factory glass childhood. pivoted on two mobile / corners. i remember the cityscape across and thru it. and then comes a 1-800- / bluevan-with-no-strings-attached to any kind of shenanigans. brake-failed and time- / spilled."

The "sheet of factory glass" carried by gloved workers, its "mobile" corners (which recur later in the poem, catching themselves softly as they trap the speaker at the intersections of walls), the lovely panoply of moving objects (vans, buildings, telephone books) that rises to its surface, enacts a kind of mimed, loosely choreographed performance, in which the world seems to spin and crystallize, until—in the next stanza—it shatters along fractillian fault lines: personal history "crumbles into its pearls of trivia."

In college, I knew someone who was an exceptionally gifted mathematician. Everything, even the number of steps that he took per day, was a beautiful sequence of numerical or spatial patterns to him. The world, in T's eyes, existed in a gorgeous continuum of elegant forms and processes: even randomness had a particular pulse, a scintillating rhythm, to it. As a reader, I see something of the same appreciation for mathematical elegance—how clarity may arrange itself from chaos, in complex and imperfect, yet particular-izable forms—at work in the poetics of ". . . world granulated."

Indeed, when I asked Mukherjee whether he felt that his training and career in engineering had influenced his creative work, and he remarked that his technical knowledge:

“ . . . has often helped me translate a scientific, mathematical or technological idea or concept to literature and fine arts—simulacrum that have produced fresh reifications of many of my literary motifs. I work in the area of computational geometry which involves abstraction that is used to simplify the complexities of real geometry. [It’s] like accepting a metaphor as a real object because it is more convenient to work with. My work also helps me understand and appreciate the scientific aesthetics of concepts like simulation, continuum and fragmentation etc. I lift a sizable portion of poetic imagery from these areas.”

A very different, and yet equally fascinating, “interdisciplinary” aesthetic also exists in Kimberly Alidio’s “[translation \(for Shariputra and Spicer\)](#),” which appears later in the same issue. Alidio is another poet who balances dual careers: she is also a historian and ethnic studies scholar who holds a PhD in US History from the University of Michigan. In the poem “translation,” her historian’s eye for the permeability of time and the artifacts of its passage inflects the arc of her speaker’s address:

“in the sour milk of your day
with letters sent
and little girls dead
in jasmine amidst bulls—
endlessly running bulls—
in your delicate, tight-fisted verse
this mean time after the poem
you wait in silence maybe
spent with a bad habit . . .”

Alidio’s poetics are one of space and amorphous flux, in which time is (almost irrelevantly) marked by the impermanence of written records. The you’s letters, their “tight-fisted verse,” flow seamlessly into one another, space and time hazily merging and running across all borders, so that even while engaged in the act of composing, the you is continually waiting—for the next word to “echo” (as Alidio writes in the next line), for the next fragment of verse to float across the space of memory and settle itself on the page.

Alidio draws attention to one of the inherent paradoxes of the impulse to record: though the act of writing is often described as a capturing or encapsulating of memory, it would, perhaps, be more accurately envisioned as an act of translation. In reflecting on legacies, we cannot replicate: we can only transmute what we perceive through the lens of our particular positions within history. The work of the writer, then, is always hazy and incomplete, a taking of “rush hour messages,” or an “eavesdropping on the dead,” rather than a precise accounting.

Alidio herself has commented (in a series of Tweet-length reflections that she shared with me via email) that her poetry exists in a distinct, but complementary relationship with her scholarly work:

“ . . . My scholarship is meant to be good for the fields of critical ethnic studies and history. My poetry is not meant to be good for anyone, at least in that way. It isn’t meant to pass down received knowledge, or convey a special cathartic experience . . .

My intellectual response is clarification. My poetic response is to muck around in all that mess.”

I was once told that the educator’s role is to answer questions while the artist’s role is to ask them. If, as Alidio says, the historian’s job is to illuminate and elucidate, while the poet’s job is to complicate and to engage with mess, then perhaps the two roles are part of a necessary equilibrium.

The life of the artist outside his or her creative work contextualizes, compliments, and occasionally informs his or her art, while the work itself, and the act of creating it, engages him or her in a process of necessary self-critique and a discipline of resistance, a digging into the muck so that the ordered and the disordered, the finite and the infinite, the rendered and the unrenderable, may exist in continual, balanced flux.

To read Aryanil Mukherjee's and Kimberly Alidio's pieces in full, please visit their poems' respective pages in [Issue 2 of LANTERN REVIEW](#): "[honeycomb scriptures :: world granulated](#)" and "[translation](#)."



Iris A. Law is the editor of [Lantern Review: A Journal of Asian American Poetry](#). Her own poems have been included in the 2009 *Best of the Net Anthology* and have been published in journals such as *Lumina*, *Cha*, *Kartika Review*, *Barely South Review*, and *The Stanford Journal of Asian American Studies*. She is a newly-minted Kundiman Fellow and a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Notre Dame.

Posted by [Paramista](#) on May 03, 2011 at 12:04 PM in [Guest Bloggers](#) | [Permalink](#)

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