



5-31-2011

Marlon Unas Esugerra interview

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Recommended Citation

George, Gis, "Marlon Unas Esugerra interview" (2011). *Asian American Art Oral History Project*. Paper 35.
http://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/35

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Interviewer: Gis George
Spoken Word Artist: Marlon Unas Esguerra
E-Mail Interview: New York, NY/Chicago, IL
Date: 5/31/2011

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring Quarter as a part of the **Asian American Art Oral History Research Project** conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.*



E-Mail Interview Transcript:

Gis George: Where are you from (birthplace, schooling, etc.)? How did your life experiences in Chicago take you to New York?

Marlon Unas Esguerra: I'm from Chicago, born and raised. I grew up in the Wicker Park/Humboldt Park area. I'm a baby of the 1st Ward. My mom was a bookkeeper in the meat-packing district and my dad was a Teamster at a factory on the west side, so we were pretty engrossed in the local, political craziness the neighborhood was famous for. Our ward was also home of Congressman Dan Rostenkowski, the "Al Capone" of Congress. They got Capone on tax evasion, Rostenkowski, who was head of the House Committee on Ways & Means, on postage fraud.

I went to St. Helen grammar school, which I didn't know then, but found out quite recently, was and is the top Roman Catholic K-8 school in the city. I went from an 8th grade graduating class of 22, to Lane Tech, which was the second largest high school in the US by population (5200) and the largest one-building high school at that time.

From there, I went to that extended suburb of Chicago, the University of IL Urbana-Champaign. I didn't finish there; started out as a computer science major, then computer science with an English minor, to an English major with a History minor, to a History Ed major. I met my wife (now ex-wife) [Anida Yoeu Ali] at U of I, and we were part of the first incarnation of the Asian American Artists Collective. Much of my identity politics was formulated and incubated at that time. U of I was a hotbed of activity for Asian Americans: fighting for a cultural center, eliminating the racist mascot, Chief Illiniwek, the early days of APAC, MAASU, MAFA, and the FilAm conference. I spent more time campus organizing and with cultural groups than I ever did studying.

I worked corporate following U of I, to pay off loans and take part of the financial boon that was the dot com boom. During that time, I began reading poetry at open mics around Chicago. They were people of color venues, and simultaneously politically-charged and love jones poetry incarnate. During one of the open mics, I met Dennis Kim, who I would eventually team up with, to be joined by Anida Yoeu Ali and Emily Chang soon after. We became I Was Born with Two Tongues after a featured reading at the Mad Bar in 1998.

It was also at that time that I decided that corporate servitude was draining my soul, and I started teaching poetry through Young Chicago Authors (YCA). I would end up working as a Teaching Artist and Program Coordinator for them until 2004. Some of my proudest moments as a teacher of poetry are with YCA.

I ended up receiving a degree in Poetry from Columbia College in 2005, then went to the University of Miami for a creative writing MFA. After Miami, I chose to teach high school through the New York City Teaching Fellows and found my way to NYC. I received a Masters in Urban Education and I'm now matriculating into a PhD program in Urban Policy from The Milano School of The New School.

When I came to New York City, I chose to pursue a teaching license in Special Education, as opposed to English Language Arts (ELA). My first year in my license, I taught high school Living Environment (Science) at the highest incident school in the state of NY (read: dangerous). I was nothing like Lean on Me or Dangerous Minds, but it was never a dull moment, to say the least. Since then, I've taught US History and ELA at an Art & Design School and now ELA, Physics and Earth Science at a Technical/Vocational high school.

GG: How would you describe your work? How is spoken word different than written word?

MUE: I would describe spoken word as the present-day extension of the oral tradition of the cultural narrative. It's what came before there was the written language. You have to ask yourself how humans passed on basic information, not just the mythos. Everyday things--how to hunt, gather, farm, prepare for the seasons, who won what battle, who was born and died--came in the oral tradition. Before we lamented over our dead, prayed to the sun, pondered our existence, came the speech to articulate the day-to-day.

So in that sense, the spoken word is the ordinary language of the people. It's meant to be immediate, unfiltered, messy, angry, democratic, temporal. Amidst the flurry and fury of words, what is memorable, survives. What survives is what is passed down into oral history.

In the written word, EVERYTHING survives. In the 21st century, the burial of the human intellect in the blur of the blogosphere will kill print, as it drowns the written word in 99.999999% of excess and banality.

Not that spoken word is pure democracy in action or some savior of the people. It's a medium for cultural preservation and assertion. And it's been around for as long as humans have communicated.

GG: What inspired you to be become a poet and who are some of your influences?

MUE: I find that my greatest influences are writers and activists who speak truths that I have experienced in my life. Their work doesn't serve as blueprints or self-help, but they do affirm basic human understandings I continue to work through, whether at 16 or 36 years old, through poetry, fiction, or physical activity. So that means Anne Sexton and her daddy issues; Lawson Inada and his relationship to jazz; Octavia Butler and the science fiction landscape of oppression; Italo Calvino's mythical invisible cities; Neruda's Odes and Opposites and Love Sonnets; what Murakami means when he talks about running or earthquakes or the perfect woman.

I started writing poetry in high school. My English teacher, Ms. Beauregard, was a tyrant my junior year. But she loved Shakespeare as well as the Romantic Poets. To my surprise, she simultaneously turned me to the classics as well as poets like Nikki Geovanni.

As I began performing in *I Was Born with Two Tongues*, I realized that Asian American poets and spoken word artists were all looking for reflections of themselves. So folks may attribute *Two Tongues* as influences, but we in turn, acknowledge their influence--Pintig Cultural Group, Isangmahal, Kiwi, Faith Santilla, Bao Phi, Mongrel, Feedback, Yellow Rage and other peers. Personal Asian American influences include Grace Lee Boggs, Maxine Hong Kingston, Yuri Kochiyama, Jessica Hagedorn, Ai, Li-Young Lee, Nick Carbo, Grain of Sand and others that came before me.

GG: How does your work address Asian American or Filipino themes?

MUE: I write about my personal experiences as an Asian American and a FilAm. That includes themes of food, family dynamics, generation gaps, racial prejudice, childhood, growing up, etc. I think with spoken word, there's a stigma that identity poetry is all a poet of color performs, but that is simply not the case. As the themes are much more complicated and subtle, so is the poetry.

GG: Can you talk about your experiences with “I Was Born With Two Tongues” and the Asian American Artists Collective Chicago? How did it influence your work?

MUE: Two Tongues was a glorious experiment. As was The Collective. All the organizing work I had done in my last years at U of I found a natural application with Two Tongues and The Collective. Both Anida and I had experience organizing conferences and bringing speakers to campus. This time around we were the ones being brought to campuses.

But before this trails off into a claim of Two Tongues and The Collective as a product of good logistical planning and timing, let me just say that Two Tongues and The Collective are two of the greatest influences of my work.

With Two Tongues, I had a vehicle to write and express myself through the lens of a malleable and borderless Asian America. As I wrote, traveled, performed, and facilitated workshops, I gathered a language to connect my personal narrative with that of a community more than half the world large. With The Collective, I poured a great deal of effort in the Young Asians with Power! (YAWP!) youth group and the Kitchen Poems writing group. In giving my energies to facilitating the arts and exploration into identity with members of YAWP and KP, the returns I received came in the form of a deeper understanding of the own passions and obsessions and demons that embody my work.

GG: How do you balance time as a teacher and as a spoken word artist? How has teaching impacted your work? 7. What are you currently working on? I have been told that you are a marathon runner. Has that influenced any of your new work?

MUE: I'm a full-time teacher now, and although I still write everyday and publish occasionally, I only do a handful of spoken word performances a year; mainly benefits and small features. I spend a great deal of my free time running (training for marathons), coaching high school basketball, or other sporting activities. I'm training for my first Triathlon in August.

Much of my writing in the last few years has migrated to more prose poetry, or even short fiction. I've always enjoyed fiction that read more like poetry and poetry in long form.

I believe teaching teens has made me a very deliberate writer, but never one to take my work too seriously. Teaching students with special needs has taught me to value my (continued) education and to humble myself before the lives and experiences of my students, lives much more grave than my own.

I currently have two manuscripts of poetry in constant revision, but rarely submitted for publication. Most recently, I've been working on a series of short stories that revolve around my experiences while running.

GG: Thanks again for taking time off for the interview, Mr. Esguerra! It has been a pleasure and I wish you nothing but the best in your future endeavors!

END