**Spelling: Poetry as spell-casting**  
Destiny Hemphill, Tamiko Beyer, Tatiana Figueroa-Ramirez, Kenji Liu, Sun Yung Shin  
Friday, March 7, 9 am - 10:15

**Event outline**

9:00 - 9:05  
**Welcome + intro to panel/ time for people to filter in**

*Tamiko* (5 min)

Hello, all. Thank you for coming to “Spelling: Poetry as spell-casting.” My name is Tamiko Beyer, I use she/her pronouns, and I’m so thrilled for this opportunity to think and feel with my fellow panelists about how poetry is a kind of spell casting and transformative act.

We live in difficult times. White supremacy and patriarchy are tightening their grip, threatening the lives and self determination of Black folks, indigenous folks, people of color, women, trans and genderqueer folks, and queer people, and those of us at the intersections of these identities. Climate catastrophe looms. Brutal capitalism and the extractive economy is destroying our communities, shredding any safety nets, and leaving the world wrecked.

And in response, there is a great rising up. People are converging to resist and build. And, more than ever, people are turning to poetry and magic. And no wonder: magic and poetry offer different ways relating to each other and the world. This panel features poets of color, some of us also queer, who approach poetry as spell-casting and as a transformative act.

Here’s how things are going to unfold over the next hour and 15 min.

Each of us will introduce ourselves and spend a few minutes talking about what and how we cast spells through or with our poems.
Then we'll read a few of our poems.

And then, we'll invite you all to be part of creating a collective spell-poem. We'll say more about that and give you instructions when it's time.

That's how we'll close out. And we invite each of you to take a stone with you when you leave.

9:05 - 9:30 Discussion/remarks. Suggested question to answer: What and how do you cast spells through or with your poems? All (5 min max per person ~25 min total)

Hello. I'm Tamiko Beyer, again. I live in Dorchester, Massachusetts, next to the Neponset river estuary, and on Massachusett land. I'm a poet, essayist, and social justice communications writer and strategist.

Right now, I'm thinking, feeling, and writing a lot about how to resist and dismantle the systems that we've found ourselves in—systems that have deliberately been put into place over centuries to concentrate power in the hands of a few, and to guard and protect that power. Systems that are on overdrive right now, hurting and killing so many people around the world, and threatening the very existence of so much life on this earth. Systems like white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism.

And within this work, I'm drawn to exploring ways of knowing and understanding (myself, other humans, and the more-than-human world) that are different from the ways I was taught to know and understand. I've spent most of my life valuing critical thinking and cerebral intelligence above all other ways of
understanding. In fact, that was the only way I thought one could understand the world.

I see now that this is like me, as a sighted and hearing person, walking around with horse-blinders, earplugs, and gloves. This might help me see very clearly what is in front of me, but it leaves out other ways available to me to know and be in the world. It prevents me from experiencing the knowledge that can come to me from—in this analogy—the information on the periphery of my vision and the sounds and textures of the world around me. So I’m learning, slowly, how to take off the blinders, earplugs, and gloves in order to understand the world differently. I’m learning to trust my intuition and emotional intelligence; learning how to engage in reciprocal communication with plants, animals, stones, and other beings; learning how I might perceive and work with the divine forces that surround me and are within me.

Poetry has always been and continues to be a way into this other kind of knowing for me. It’s a way of uncovering the truths within me, a way to hear and channel my ancestors and the forces of the universe. It’s a way for me to make the leap from thinking to feeling to intuiting and back again.

And it can be as subversive as hell to the systems that want and need all of us to fall into line, to be lulled by the status quo. Poetry as spell casting is my way of imagining into being different kinds of systems, different approaches to how humans can possibly live with each other and the rest of the planet. I’m interested in writing from the margins—not toward the center—but towards a new configuration of society.

In truth, I’m interested in nothing less than a radical transformation of society, of how we relate to each
other and the world around us. I’m interested in how to transform political and economic power from something hoarded and wielded as a weapon into a tool that’s freely shared and used to nourish and lift us all up. I’m interested in how we can structure our lives and society rooted in a foundation of justice and based on relationships grounded in love and respect.

We learn from the myths, stories, and folktales of many of our cultures that great transformation can happen suddenly, and by magic. But we also learn such magic doesn’t happen without groundwork—whether that groundwork is a person wishing and dreaming, or going on a great journey, or going to the aid another creature, or casting a spell or two. Or some combination of all of this.

I see my poems as doing a small part in laying down this groundwork: visioning and spell casting toward societal transformation.

All (2 poems per person ~ 25 min total)

the future is unsettled
Destiny

may the sediment of this
sentiment s(h)ifting the
ruins unsettle you &
make no apology
for our being untethered
to the telluric— from the
chasm we were born
& from the chasm we birth:
the unearthing be
shimmering otherworldly

we cicada ourselves, yes,
as it is the soft dirt
that has saved & salvaged us,
yes. & also because we
are insistent on

return. not all haunting’s bad,
no. but for you it
just might be. if you hear our
song as strident, know
this: we give thanks to the home

found underground & give thanks
to the swamps that have
engulfed our secrets, marooned
us as secret. we honor
the dirt moving underneath

reminding us that to ground
& to unground takes
practice. if you hear our song
as strident, notice:
the contingency you im/

pose(d) is the contingency
that you now oppose.
haunting infractions refract.
we’re coming with our breath
to gust settlements to dust.

here we inhale, the stirring
before collapse. we
exhale & blow your walls down.
you’re so vain you
think this song ain’t about you

don’t you keep our names in your mouth
say. take all names out
your mouth. the world you made yours
is undone. the chasm
expands. we say let there be

flight. yes. there flight be
Our eyes bend what they cannot see. The end of deepest winter.

I suspect things are growing again. After sleeping soundly for centuries, muddy buds are pushing into the crunch of air.

Will we miss the deep freeze? The sound of snow falling on snow?

Many days I start off as you and end leagues away.

Is it my ambiguous skin? Not human, not amphibian, not fowl, not insect, but mammal.

And what of the cyber creatures?

*Of the people*, we say. A casing as bright as a beetle of yore. What it means to never be alone again.

Imagine the ancient scientists in their white coats standing forever with hands behind their backs. Heads bowed in prayer or punishment. Either way, we’re their splayed creation myth—hubris or bridge.

A whole planet of things to restore or discard, swirling in currents, washing up into caves.

All day, I waited for the light to hit just so. Rib bones, aluminum, rebar. Waited for a sign—what to do with this inheritance.

Did we ask for such patience, such flight?

All day, I watched the flowers turn their new faces to the old sun. That’s devotion. Or maybe instinct. Have we learned the difference?

The sex of flowers undoes me. Such delicate anatomy.

I want to be fingers not folded but crane. I want to be salt to your kingdom. I will be bird to your wire.

“The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.”

Donna Haraway “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene”

e-flux, Journal #75
SPECIMENS OF IMMORTALITY (Sun Yung)

Baroque elaborations and tableaux of the Dodo / White mourning doves suspended by invisible wire / All the rabbits wear turtle-shell helmets and face the sunrise as an army of sweet / Sentinels everywhere hidden bones like flutes of wire / Perpetual alert to the guards of the necropolis / You are the largest of the lionesses with an assortment of cubs that died before you were born / The birth of death / Seedless grapes sewn in the vineyard / Museum guard cultivars of boredom the gore the charge the wall of horns / Eyes everlasting the horizon prey or predator / Freeze us in the hunt in the rut in the reliefless past / My beauty is made mostly of proteins / Astringent portraiture salts and cures and trophy / Trophy with concealed bullet wounds / The soft solace of killing / The school of beauty saved from the burning / Sightless zoo breathless savannah glass forest / Dioramas of longing / Big game hunter the new world the safari / The feral the wild the stampede the old the lame the wounded / The wolf and the lamb lie together at the end of the world / My horns ground to medicine / My blood blown into glass

a prophet-mother channels a message on the afterlife (Destiny)

here/the world comes undone/as a singular explosion. no—— more/ like an elliptical eruption/ more like patchwork/ say we/we, who know the signs/ & believe them not/who believe the signs/but know them not/who believe &who know/we, who smell mothballs/when there are none/who dream of fish scales/spilling from our mouths/when we try to speak & plastics spilling from theirs/when they try to speak to us/we, who dream of running/ with yellow balloons/ in our left hands/ & trying to release them/before they pop & unleash/ drones. only to wake up again/ & again & again/ to drones ending whole worlds/ over there & over there &over here & over there/ we, whose senses/ are conditioned to accommodate oppression & exploitation/even our own/we, who study pressure points/of the human body/of the system/the u.s./ say apply pressure/here/apply pressure/here/ & the world comes undone/ we, the living in the wake/ we, a passing, present preservation of a general past/that keeps reappearing/ we, spilling out from within/ an agitated, fermenting world/we, for whom i am not i/ i am a black commons/spilling out/ from within our desire/ to access freedom/we, for whom & through whom/ other dreams have come to live/we, who some say/are both too late & too early/who can predict when we might/ rouse, bolt, or hurl/us all into the future?/ this is not the nostalgic moment/ you wished you lived in/but the mythical place of now/located in the memory & consciousness/ of those who live with us
& after us  /& before us/we, free despite thirst/lovely in our dust/we, the probable realms/of impossibility/ beyond the limits/the uncharted territory/ beyond the danger/ we, the maps between past &present/ we, who had been driven into cocoons underground/ we, who took risks that could make it harder to fly/we, who know we grieve/ because we love/ we who sip each other’s grief/with love/ look at us/looking the way we looking/look at our wings/look at our moonlight flight now/looking like a giant moth/ sipping the tears of an antbird

[with lines from Kara Keeling, Toni Cade Bambara, Christina Sharpe, Lauren Hunter, Charles T. Patridge, Tongo Eisen-Martin, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Zora Neale Hurston, Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Phaswane Phe, Harryette Mullen, Lori Dorn]

**Tatiana Figueroa Ramirez**

**Despojo**

Your chest heavy, absorbing
molasses air. Hands tremble.
This energy is not yours.
Anger & tears flood
your body. Category 5 inundated
streetveins & rivers, so you pray
to María.

Despójate.

Let water blessed
by the virgin herself drench
you. Frigid. Inhale
cigar smoke fresh from La Habana. Feel
heat from blue orange flames at your feet.
Santa Barbara’s gala apple skin scarf cloaks
you. Chant verses learned in church harmonize
with bronze bells ringing
around you. Rose water fills
atmosphere with morning dew light.

Despójate.

Imagine clouded demons pushed
away & howling screams forgotten. Scrape
pain from your body & wash
sadness off of your sternum.
Vibrations tremor to disappear. Cast
this all far from you with intent. Deny permission for anything to return.
Throw it to the fire. Changó.
Throw it to the water. Ochún.
Throw it to the heavens. Obatalá.

Despójate.

**Perfumes**

It begins outside. In your backyard or the trees down the road by the basketball court. Usually, in your grandmother’s garden.
You’ll need
- lavender
- roses
- lilies
- & mums.
To relax the strain stuck in the base of your neck. To perfume the space around your mind & calm your shiver. To purify open wounds from the permanence of scars. To ease your breath, allowing laughter to wake again.

Think good thoughts.

It moves inside. In your home or that of a loved one under the veil of God’s hand. It will always be in the kitchen.
You’ll need
- aged rum
- boiling water
- a caldero
- & fire.
To preserve the sugar scents dancing through the liquid ripples. To steam clear clogged channels for positive energy. To contain the power brewing over the flame. To display the beauty of oblate blooms & blessed liquids.

Think good thoughts.

It grows deeper. In your heart & in your spirit. In your valves, guiding the blood of ancestors through your body.
You’ll need
- trust
- gratitude
- humility
- & purpose.
To thank the blossoms for their sacrifice & gifts. To invoke protective beings feeding your fragrant caldo. To set your intentions for creating these waters, birthing a bouquet, & cleansing yourself.
Blue Passport

It slips me in the back door.

In the late 70s and early 80s, our rag-tag family travelled every two years to the American Embassy in Tokyo. I collected visa stamps. I would never be a citizen, they told me, of the country where my baby teeth fell out and my adult teeth grew in. I never learned to bow in the right way at the right time. That was part of it. I kept the passport as evidence.

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It is not a talisman. It gives limited protection. Evidence: Executive Order 9066.

At the Roosevelt memorial, my father muses on how wise a president he was. I sit next to the larger-than-life statue of Fala, Roosevelt’s Scottish Terrier, who he took everywhere. Fala’s bronze eartips are shiny from the strokes of a hundred thousand strangers carrying a rainbow of passports.

*He signed the evacuation order*, I say. My mother nods. Silent, we gaze at the next sculpture: our mouths in relief.

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I pass so easily
my heart flutters.

This is a medical condition.
Your bone marrow
does not match mine.

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Passport with holes so my image
fragments into confetti-shaped shadows.
Passport smelling of milk and rice.

Passport guarantees ______ or nothing at all.
Passport my ticket to ride
the ferris wheel and watch

the beach town spread below, the sea
a thin, blue line
licking the sand. Tiny people hold
tiny sticks of cotton candy,
and a gull wheels by.
Passport sings along:
America, America.

//

Aliases I have known: pioneer girl in a cotton bonnet and a heart full of manifest destiny.
Never a laundry worker. Never a cook. Once, a cowboy in rawhide chaps, riding into the
desert sunset. Never a prisoner. No one said: that’s where camp was. We didn’t know
what camp was back then.

//

Hold it like a meringue, like a pie crust flaking into three pm tea time.
Lock it in the safe; don’t forget where you put the key.
Tie it around your neck with a string—a third, fluttery breast.
When they come for you, place it over your heart. It just might slow a bullet.

(Sun Yung’s 2 poems)

CASTAWAYS IN PARADISE | “PASSING THROUGH: NONE” [1]

“What brings you here,” he asked.
“What do you seek in this high tower, Phaëthon—you, an heir no parent
would deny?”

They saw tracks of animals—goats, the men assumed,
but actually deer—but found the corpse of only one.
Like so much else in the “other word,” they knew not
what to make of the sight.
The father put aside his shining crown and told him to draw nearer and took him in his arms: “It would not be appropriate for me to disavow our relationship.”

Consumed by the idea of this small child alone in the wilderness, Columbus intervened, pledging the boy “to God and fortune.”

How often she would be too terrified to lie down by herself in the deep woods, and wandered to the fields near her old home/...Often she hid herself at the sight of beasts, forgetting that she was a beast herself. And the bear was frightened by the sight of bears up in the mountains—and afraid of wolves, although her father had been changed to one.

Columbus assumed that the object “must be those of some ancestors of the family; because those houses were of a kind where many persons live in one, and they should be relations descended from only one.”
To keep her from successfully appealing to Jupiter, her speech was snatched away: only a growl from deep within her chest, a rumble, hoarse and menacing, remained.

A pile of bare human bones testified to their predilection: “All that could be gnawed on, had been gnawed on, and all that was left, was what could not be eaten, because it was inedible.”

[1] Acknowledgments:
- personal Passport: Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Republic of Korea issued April 16, 1975 courtesy of the author
- second half of the title of poem from page 7 of Passport listed above
- text on the left from Book II “Of Mortal Children,” Ovid’s Metamorphoses translated by Charles Martin
- first half of the title of poem and text on the right from Columbus: The Four Voyages 1492 – 1504 by Laurence Bergreen

9:55 - 10:15  **Collective poem-spell** (20 min)
- Introduction to collective poem-spell *Destiny* (2 min)
• People get cards, spend a moment meditating on it (2 min)
• Write a line (3 min)
• We gather in a circle and read our line. People can pass if they want. We do the reading twice (10 min)

10:15 **Closing.** People return cards and take a stone.