EVENT TITLE: Round Characters: Writing the Family in Creative Nonfiction

DESCRIPTION:
How do we avoid revenge prose and the flat characters it produces? This panel focuses on creative work that grows out of a literary crafting of the complex experiences of the writer/narrator with their family members. This panel will explore the writers’ representations of their individual home family communities, the challenges of writing the personal and intimate, and the insights they gained from the different techniques for constructing character on the page.

CATEGORY:
Creative Nonfiction Reading

ORGANIZER AND MODERATOR:
José Antonio Rodríguez’s most recent book is the memoir House Built on Ashes, finalist for the PEN America Los Angeles and Lambda Literary awards. His work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Nation, Poetry, The New Republic, the Poetry Society of America online, and elsewhere. He teaches creative writing in the MFA program at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.

PARTICIPANT BIOS:

Sarah Jefferis is an author, editor, and mentor. Through her consultant business, Write. Now., she designs generative workshops on the creative process. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Cornell University and a PhD in Creative Writing from SUNY Binghamton. Her poetry collection, What Enters the Mouth, was published in 2017 by Standing Stone Books. Her poems and nonfiction have appeared in Rhino, The Mississippi Review, The American Literary Review, and other journals. Currently she is a lecturer at Cornell and makes a feminist home for her two daughters in Ithaca, New York.

Sarah Pape teaches English and works as the Managing Editor of Watershed Review at Chico State. Her poetry and prose has recently been published or is forthcoming in: The New York Times, New England Review, Passages North, Ecotone, Crab Orchard Review, The Pinch, Hayden’s Ferry Review, and others. Her chapbook, Ruination Atlas, was published by dancing girl press. She curates community literary programming at the 1078 Gallery and is a member of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers.
PARTICIPANTS’ INITIAL REMARKS:

Barrett Bowlin will focus on the act of using misdirection to write about family, through humor and scientific/medical observation of 'characters' within the narrative. He'll read from his essay collection manuscript, *BlackBeltFirstAidKits*, and will follow up with suggestions on how to broach discussions with family members that you've written about them.

Sarah Jefferis will read from her lyrical essays about being a single mama and how beautifully difficult it is to raise two feminist girls in upstate New York. She will speak specifically about how trauma impacts the female body of the character in the essay, and include reflections on how shifting the creative process can enhance memory recall and sentence structure.

Sarah Pape will read excerpts from her essay collection in progress, *The Way I Love You Most*, and draw out examples of characterization as acts of empathy, distillation, and complications of memory. She will speak directly to the challenges of writing about those you spend your life with (partners, children, friends) and the many identities formed for the purpose of protecting their experience, while still engaging complex material in the writing.

José Antonio Rodríguez will read excerpts from his memoir *House Built on Ashes*, and discuss how literary and cultural theory texts and concepts have provided valuable lenses through which he writes about family. Examples include the concept of the panopticon by Michel Foucault and state apparatuses by Louis Althusser.

MODERATOR QUESTIONS:

1. What is your first concern or priority when writing about family, even when family may not be the focus of a particular piece?

2. How has your approach to writing about family evolved throughout the years?

3. How does the genre you are writing in determine the approach to creating believable characters based off family members?

4. Are there some moments you won't write about when it comes to family because they remain events and can't be transformed into made objects?