

## Interrogating the Racial Past Through Research-Based Poetry

Confederate monuments fall, on the one hand. Klansmen march openly, on the other. As we're gripped again by tensions we haven't yet outgrown – as nation, as world – interrogating the racial past seems key to understanding and withstanding our present circumstance. Five poets of varied backgrounds explore their strategies to expose old debts, revivify forgotten voices, question motivations, fracture and re-set the broken language of the culture, to find within the past a way forward.

With shocking assaults on black lives continually in the news, within a context of the more insidious assaults of poverty, systematic incarceration, and environmental racism, it seems imperative for both black and white writers not only to bear witness to contemporary circumstance, but also to examine causes, reconsider assumptions, question the historical record. This panel – which includes South African as well as North American concerns – exemplifies that challenging effort.

When we decide to write about the past, we might see that choice as a commitment to engage the dynamics of the present as well, as historical context provides a means for making our present circumstances legible.

### Outline:

#### I: Introductions

Brief opening remarks and introductions from the moderator, for a likely total of 5 minutes or less.

#### II: Presentations

We'll begin the panel by having each participant read a representative poem from a project that engages the racial past, and talk briefly about the experience of writing that poem. Each presentation will take 5 minutes or less, for a likely total of 25 minutes.

#### III: Topics

We'll continue our discussion by responding to the following topics. To keep the conversation moving, we'll have each panelist begin the discussion of one of these topics, and then invite a second panelist to respond as well. Our goal will be a lively

discussion rather than a comprehensive one. We'll consider each topic for approximately 5 minutes, for a likely total of 25 minutes.

1. contemporary circumstances that prompted our decisions to write about the past;
2. the sorts of research we've found compatible with our urgencies;
3. difficulties we've encountered, and revelations that have surprised us;
4. formal approaches that the project(s) have insisted on;
5. ways that exploring the past has illuminated and complicated our understanding of the present.

#### IV: Exploration

Questions from the panelists for each other: an opportunity to extend the insights considered in II and III. A likely total of 10 minutes.

#### V. Participation

Questions for the panelists from the audience, and a more general discussion. A likely total of 10 minutes.