

## Not Yet Born and Again: A Community

The historian and classicist Erich Gruen, in a recent essay, wrote that “the ancients repeatedly expressed a sense of community through descent, through a common ancestor, through the bloodline, through shared origins, whether real or (much more commonly) fictitious.”<sup>(1)</sup> This volume of essays, the fruits of *A-festival*, a poetry festival and conference in Hanoi, Vietnam in August 2016, expresses a sense of community rather through shared interests in creating art, promoting literature, expressing oneself. It is born of the need to address different forms of challenges (including censorship, regardless of how it is defined by individuals, and seeking the right language to express the right sentiment), and more importantly, the coming together of writers from different parts of the world to talk through ideas and thoughts and to form enduring bonds of friendship.

As a participant in the *A-festival*, I am delighted to see how the spoken presentations of the conference, which inspired such passionate and thoughtful discussions, have been translated into the collected writings here. The conference was divided into three panels, one treating personal relationships in poetry, one focusing on the act of translation, and one contemplating how publishing choices are made. These papers are now reunited on the pages of this book—a more lasting literary gathering/party that reignites whenever the book is picked up and read.

Though exploring a wide range of topics, the essays in the volume focus on several main themes, with some essays touching upon more than one of these. There are pieces that provide either a panoramic perspective or a significant snapshot of the poetry tradition or practice of a particular locale. Among these are Maung Day’s “Social Engagement in the Poetry of New Generation Burmese Poets”, Nhã Thuyên’s “The Possibilities and

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1. Erich Gruen, “Did Ancient Identity Depend on Ethnicity? A Preliminary Probe.” *Phoenix*, Vol. 67 (2013), p. 1.

Limits of Play: Poetry & (Self)Publishing Practices in Vietnam Today” and Thanh Phùng’s “Vietnamese Poetry: Community, Individuality, and the Personal”. In Thuyên’s powerful and poignant essay, she also writes about the concerns her research project of underground voices in Vietnamese poetry raised, and the oppression and intimidation she experienced as a result. Translation takes center stage in James Shea’s “Tasks of the New Translator: East Asian Poetry in English Translation” and Kaitlin Rees’s “Dreadful Hope in a Tottering Centre of Sky.” While Shea’s piece investigates the changes found in the translation of East Asian Poetry in recent years, Rees’s personal essay articulates a simultaneously frustrating and intriguing relationship between a translator and the second language that she loves and which she zealously works with. Rees’s memoir, along with Thuyên’s piece, belongs to the group of essays that lays bare the vulnerability of individual writers. Colin Cheney’s “Creepy-Ass Cracker”, Nur Soliman’s “Writing in Solitudes” and my own “We Now, Now Now: On Writing Political Poems” discuss what it means to be someone using words day-in and day-out, wrapped in occasional insecurities and sometimes heavy expectations of others.

In all of these essays, one thing stands out: politics. Politics relating to how groups define themselves and form their identity against odds; gender politics, such as making certain female writers, previously underrepresented, more visible; language politics—which language to use? whose language? when is it allowed and disallowed? what are the consequences of using and misappropriating it?; politics that have to do with governments, regimes, histories and policies; and lastly, politics of the more personal kind manifested in everyday decisions, a form of politics that does not go away, that frightens one but at the same time also enriches one’s writing and sharpens one’s awareness of being alive.

I have read these essays several times and each time discovered new nuances that I had previously missed, as well as found

stronger intellectual and emotional connections with the writers. We hope those coming to the collection with fresh eyes will appreciate our voices, and that some of the essays may prompt them to create something new, something pressing, and something personal. As the world becomes increasingly prey to hardline intolerant views, the mutual understanding that literature and art foster is *now* as urgently needed as ever.

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