

National Poetry Month Featured Poet: Ronaldo Wilson

written by Entropy | April 30, 2017



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1) Why poetry?

Poetry, as a primary mode, is central to my art practice, and the first art medium in which I sought sustained formal training. I was fortunate to have apprenticed, at a relatively early age – 19 to 28 – under poets: Ishmael Reed, June Jordan, Medbh MCGuckian, Peter Dale Scott, Allen Ginsberg, Galway Kinnell, Cornelius Eady, Sharon Olds, and poet-critics Alfred Arteaga, Eve Sedgwick, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Meena Alexander. All of these writers helped me to understand, early on, how poetry can provide a means through which to navigate a practice of living through explorations of race, class, gender, sexuality, desire, and power, particularly as a way to navigate critical questions that help to diagnose our socio-cultural lot, through observation, record, and re-imagining. As an artist who works across disciplines, poetry's demands: the line, space, the melodic, its drift, meditation—the many shapes in which it convenes and imports—compel and guide my work in dance, masks, multiple personas, locations, song, all animating my current performances in freestyle, sound, drawings, and video.

2) Do you feel like poetry is more or less important & relevant today?

I always feel poetry is relevant, all of the time. Just as I feel art is relevant, all of the time. Poetry as stance, as marker of one's place and entry into—poetry unhinges all of my expected selves, so I remain present in the mix and encounter of life. In much of my activities, I'm invested in a sustained study of poetry and poetics, and in this, finding language that offers new and alternative ways of seeing and being. I feel Poetry is relevant *now* in the ways it takes up all kinds of forms: I seek the archival, institutional, sonic, spoken, visual, hip-hop, mixed-modes, political,

shifting, beat-box, exploding mediums. In this way, I am thinking of the range of poetry, in open ways, for instance, via the work of Mendi & Keith Obadike's sound installations, Kendrick Lamar's riveting lyric explorations in rap, and what's possible, in Kara Walker's deft hand and historical approximations in gouache and sugar; too, I think of the recent films, *Moonlight* and *Get Out*, how they offer lingering figures and psycho-social worlds that map the unconscious in the face of lingering after effects: say the 3ft tall pet rabbit found dead in a cargo hold, shortly after a brown doctor is beaten, then dragged off another plane to the sound of the Proud Boys' bloody chests, or Le Pen, or Ivanka's vile father, so much of this dizzying violation & loss, Bans, Deadlines, MOAB demands poetry as a way back into the hot mess.

3) Tell us about one poet who has greatly influenced you as a writer and a thinker.

Gwendolyn Brooks continues to be an influence, as poet, archivist, multi-modal formalist, but above all visionary experimenter, and, of course, theorist—her poetics—

a deciphering and dislodging of a world for a world she created, wholly her own. Encountering the many poetry books, interviews, autobiographical "reports," and spending time in her archives at the Bancroft Library allowed me to see how attentive she was to letting *everything* into her art-life-life's art: news clippings, politics, sounds, her hand writing everywhere, hotel stationary, bills, notes on other poets, the field-pithy, and perfect-finding its way into Brooks's poetry. Its intricate internal architecture, and capacious life-landscapes gave me a way to first theorize (and rethink how the theoretical could manifest) in facing the work of the artist Ellen Gallagher, and poet Claudia Rankine, the tennis players Venus and Serena Williams, and the U.S. lynching images from James Allen's exhibit and collection *Without Sanctuary*. Brooks's work served as the foundation for my Phd dissertation: *Black Bodies Black Field(s): 20th Century and Contemporary Poetics of the Black Body in African American Poetry and Visual Culture*, a long meditation (from 2001-2009) that continues to fuel so much of my work and art practice.

4) Tell us about one lesser-known contemporary poet who you'd like more people to know about.

I hope it's okay that I name three, each working in unique and inventive ways:

Soham Patel, author of *Riva: A Chapter* (---' kitchen-shy press, 2013) [works and plays across forms, directly into sound, space and draft](#).

Angel Dominguez author of *Desgraciado* (Econo Textual Objects, 2017), and *Black Lavender Milk* (Timeless Infinite Light, 2015) [excavates desire, history, torquing love](#).

Angela Peñaredondo, author of *All Things Lose Thousands of Times* (Inlandia Institute, 2016) [cleaves a migratory poetics through many modes, to include](#)

[sound/text/video.](#)

5) Share with us one of your recent poems and tell us a little bit about its context.

WHERE

At the park down the street and around the corner where we play tennis, I once heard buffed, bearded James say he seduced a woman in the bathroom, hiked her dress up and did her on the counter. John Borden, at our house, sitting on our couch—his junk hangs out, and his wife Mary realizing we have no toilet paper, dips in her purse. Doody, their son, is dark and gangly, and he hits the tennis ball over the fence like it's a baseball.

My Dad thinks everyone has athletic talent, or at least he knows how to read a swing, and Doody's is across his body & I wonder about my dad's knife fights in Nam. He says it's easier to fight someone with a knife than someone without one, because you can focus on one point.

Sometimes, I think of my father's body, the raised mole on his back, or the way he says, At the bottom of the sea, when I ask where it is, or he asks me, What are you thinking?—when I stare into distance. He follows my mother in the store, and one day, he'll simply be lost around her garden.

There are no more tomatoes on the vine, and a part of me is leaving as I enter the abyss of what I want to say when I awake, as if something was pulled out of me, where the pressure is only released by chancing on a screen shot: *ROGER FEDERER, STRETCHED*. Fed-Eh-Reh, Dad says & he spelled Flour, *FLOWER* on the Tupperware.

When my father was a small boy, he hit a girl, got caught & was forced to stand in the corner, wearing a paper dress and a "Dunce" cap. Or the stolen bundle of aluminum, a ball he made from tearing all the material off the backside of gum wrappers, fashioning this into a sphere, until a boy snatched it: who stole it—Dad—was he a sculptor? Did he ever draw? Did he make shapes?

All I want is to be in shape, but I get my fat from you, Dad, and I suppose I get my movement from you too, but why am I writing about you as though you're dead, when you're not?

Note on the poem:

"WHERE" appears in *Farther Traveler: Poetry, Prose, Other* (Counterpath 2015), a collection framed by a father's dementia, a vehicle through which to explore racial and sexual violence, trauma and pleasure through multiple forms, from the sonnet to the journal, free verse poem to the lyric essay, to original ink and watercolor portraits.

"WHERE" is interested in staging memory (a father's/my own) in many layers, scenes of instruction, the erotic, sport, the playground with whatever acuity possible through the press of mental illness, loss and humiliation (a

father's/ my own) – “WHERE” attempts, through this, to unveil memory, via drifting sites: however fractured and widely embedded—it recalls and releases into the present.

Ronaldo V. Wilson, PhD, is the author of [*Narrative of the Life of the Brown Boy and the White Man*](#) (University of Pittsburgh, 2008), winner of the 2007 Cave Canem Prize., [*Poems of the Black Object*](#) ([Futurepoem Books](#), 2009), winner of the Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry and the Asian American Literary Award in Poetry in 2010. His latest books are *Farther Traveler: Poetry, Prose, Other* (Counterpath Press, 2015), finalist for a Thom Gunn Award for Gay Poetry and *Lucy 72* (1913 Press, 2016).

Co-founder of the Black Took Collective, Wilson is also a mixed media artist, dancer and performer. His *Off the Dome: Rants, Raps, and Meditations*, an online album, exists on *The Conversant*: <http://theconversant.org/?p=3634>. His short films “Grey,” “White,” “Blue,” “Red,” “Green,” “Brown,” “Pink,” “Black,” can also be found online at the Center for Art and Thought. <http://centerforartandthought.org/work/project/artist-in-residence?page=2>.

Wilson is currently an Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, serving on the core faculty of the Creative Critical PhD Program, and co-directing the Creative Writing Program. He splits his time between Santa Cruz, CA and Long Island, New York.