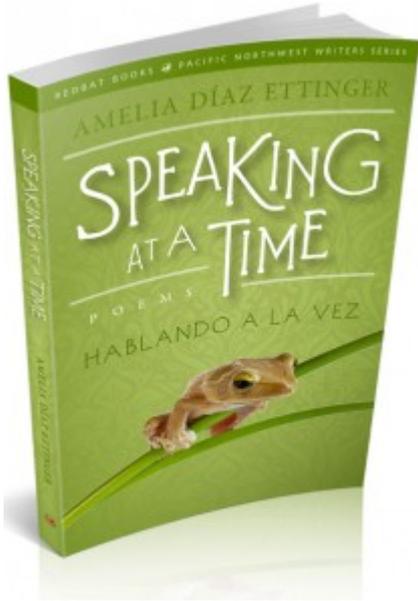


[Speaking At A Time by Amelia Díaz Ettinger](#)

written by John Yohe | February 10, 2016



Speaking At A Time by Amelia Díaz Ettinger
Red Bat Books, 2015
96 pages – [Red Bat](#) / [Amazon](#)

I did not expect to attend a reading by Amelia Díaz Ettinger in Salem, Oregon recently. I had come to hear the current Poet Laureate, Peter Sears, along with another poet. Sears couldn't make it, though I learned that his big project as Laureate is to champion voices of people of color in Oregon. Thus, Ettinger (née Díaz) a puerto rican poet living in eastern Oregon, with her new book, *Speaking At A Time*, read on her own, to a sizable crowd and, despite the Salem Library having no clue how to host a poetry reading (sigh...) Ettinger overcame that gracefully and wowed us all, in english *and* spanish.

Who would have thought that from the backwoods of eastern Oregon would come a puerto rican poet? But, as Ettinger explained, she is part of a large diaspora of puerto ricans (who, remember, are american citizens—Puerto Rico being an american territory) that has been unfolding for decades—it's been true for a while that there are more *puertorriqueños* in New York City than in Puerto Rico—though it has become more pronounced recently as the government there goes into bankruptcy.

Ettinger's story is a little different than most though, and while I don't usually like to sell a book on an author's background (preferring to talk about the actual text) her's is interesting, in that, as she shared with us at the reading, she left not out of economic necessity (though that existed) but more out of cultural necessity: having graduated from college early, in her small town she was still required to have an adult escort to go on a date

to the movies. She needed freedom, and so, with a meager savings, left—flew to the U.S., bought a cheap car, and drove across the the country, stopping in at universities, looking for a right fit for her graduate studies.

Which was not, however, in english or literature or writing, but in science. And she found a good fit in the Pacific Northwest, where she has lived ever since, working as a teacher of both high school science, and spanish (though now retired). Her interest in the biological sciences is woven throughout *Speaking At A Time*, like in “El Yunque” a poem about the most famous mountain in Puerto Rico (an excerpt):

I want to be in this shadowed room
where canopy and moss-like dirt
share secrets with the senses
where dew collects on dwarfed trees
where my voice could be thunder
of a tree frog chorus:
—*iCoquí, coquí, coquí!*

Speaking At A Time is set up like a dual-language book, with english-version poems in on the right, and the spanish on the left. Interestingly though, Ettinger, though a native spanish speaker, wrote all of the poems in english, her second language, then went back for the publication of this book and translated them into spanish. Which, she thought, would be easy, but ended up taking her a year

Though I too was born in Puerto Rico, and though I speak a *bastante* amount of *español*, I’m not fluent, english is my main language, and so I share (at least) some english speakers love for the *sound* of certain languages, especially spanish, to the point where I kind of prefer Ettinger’s poems in their spanish versions more than their english ones, even though I might actually understand the english ones better and, again, even though she originally wrote them in english. In fact, I found myself reading the english versions first, as a prelude. Like, ok that’s what the poem *means*, now I’m going to read the spanish version for how it *sounds*.

If Ettinger had not told us at her reading that the two books of poetry she took with her when she left Puerto Rico were ones by Pablo Neruda And García Lorca, seeing (and hearing) that they were her main influences would not be difficult. Neruda’s especially is there right from the first pages, with odes to the mango and banana/plantain: ‘elemental’ or common things in our lives that Neruda honored in his own *Odas Elementales*. But her poems *look*, and read, like the poems of these two poets, flowing between the more free verse broken(-up) lines of Neruda in some, to more structured stanzas that García Lorca used, to emulate flamenco lyrics, like (this excerpt from) “Exile”:

Hour upon hour spent in this cell
thinking of *tamarindos* and *guayabas*
the taste of sun within my throat.

Hour upon hour, this thirst won’t perish.
Words that sound of coconut water

that smell of ocean and mulattoes

The Neruda 'free' influence wins out overall, even especially in Ettinger's tribute/ode "A Poem for García Lorca," maybe the best poem in the collection, in english or spanish:

I sat by the fountain
when my hair was young
waiting for fortune
or a man
to take me away.
When he came
with a lily in his hand
and a dryness on his lips
from so much living
or maybe longing—
a Granadian soul—
I gave him nothing.

And since
then, I have found
moon and man
and in that desert
returned to the fountain
to find his lily
as always—
white, radiant
with his blood.
I have taken the lily to bed
and in our solitude we pray.
She gives me his water
and still
I give him nothing.

As I copy the poem out for this review, I can't help hearing/feeling a little Emily Dickinson in there too. Perhaps it's just the dashes, but there's a certain alone longing that I associate with Dickinson. Ettinger shared with us at the reading that this poem is a response to a poem by García Lorca, with the same scene, in which Ettinger puts herself in the girl's place. Which I love, because I'm very much interested in how writers respond to and emulate other writers, though I don't think you need to know the backstory for the poem to 'work,' nor do you need to know anything about, say, Lorca being gay, which was important to Ettinger. The fact that the poem 'works' (or speaks) at all these levels is an example of good poetry, period.

One of the blurbs on *Speaking At A Time* claims that Ettinger is/will be an important voice in puerto rican literature. I'm not sure—I'd like it to be true, I just can't claim to know enough about puerto rican literature (though reading her makes me want to know more). Certainly *Speaking At A Time* is more about Puerto Rico than Oregon, though Oregon is there, in poems like "Puerto Rican In Oregon" and "Nights in Oregon." I like the idea that more even than an oregonian or puerto rican voice, we can talk about Ettinger as an american

voice, an american poet, and that american poetry can (does, must) include spanish.