

Interview with Tiphanie Yanique

Emily Woodworth and Holly Eck
with Keya Mitra



Tiphonie Yanique visited Pacific University as part of the Visiting Writers Series hosted by the English Department in the spring of 2016. Creative Writing students Emily Woodworth and Holly Eck, along with Professor Keya Mitra, sat down with Tiphonie and discussed her acclaimed novel, *The Land of Love and Drowning* (Riverhead 2015), her writing process, and the relationship between teaching and writing.

Tiphonie Yanique is the author of the poetry collection, *Wife*, which won the 2016 Bocas Prize in Caribbean poetry and the United Kingdom's 2016 Forward/Felix Dennis Prize for a First Collection. Tiphonie is also the author of the novel, *Land of Love and Drowning*, which won the 2014 Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Award from the Center for Fiction, the Phillis Wheatley Award for Pan-African Literature, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Family Foundation Award, and was listed by NPR as one of the Best Book of 2014. *Land of Love and Drowning* was also a finalist for the Orion Award in Environmental Literature and the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award. She is also the author of a collection of stories, *How to Escape from a Leper Colony: A Novella and Stories* (Graywolf, 2010), which won her a listing as one of the National Book Foundation's 5Under35. Her writing has also won the Bocas Award for Caribbean Fiction, the Boston Review Prize in Fiction, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers Award, a Pushcart Prize, a Fulbright Scholarship and an Academy of American Poet's Prize. She has been listed by the *Boston Globe* as one of the sixteen cultural figures to watch out for and her writing has been published in the *New York Times*, *Best African American Fiction*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *American Short Fiction*, among others. Tiphonie is from the Virgin Islands and is

an associate professor at Wesleyan University. She lives in New Rochelle, New York with her husband, teacher and photographer Moses Djeli, and their three children.

Emily Woodworth: In many of the reviews of your novel *The Land of Love and Drowning*, you were compared to Gabriel García Márquez. Were you influenced by him? Who were your other major literary influences?

Tiphonie Yanique: The novel is a magical realist sort of novel. At least, that's one way to characterize it. And when people think of magical realism, the primary person we usually think of is Gabriel García Márquez, the late, great Colombian author. I would say that what I'm doing is different than what he did. He utilizes a lot of Catholic mythology and symbolism. I grew up Catholic, so I'm very versed in his symbolism—and I think it's genius—but he uses a lot of that, and what I use more is the mythology that is native to the islands that I'm from, which is the Virgin Islands.

For instance, I've got a woman who has a cow foot. She is based on a mythical being; a jumbie, a ghost; in the Virgin Islands who is called "The Cow-Foot Woman." And in other parts of the Caribbean she has other names. She's a beautiful woman who is a seductress who has one foot that's a hoof, and she hides it by wearing very long dresses. And she only shows her hoof when she's in the middle of seduction.

So I have a character who is like her. My character's name is Rebekah, and she has a hoof. But she's a real person. She's not a ghost. So my idea was what would it mean if these myths were brought to life? What would it mean for



Virgin Island culture if these myths were vibrant and real? I wanted to do that in my work.

All of that being said, García Márquez is a huge influence on my work. He's the first author who showed me that I *could* do this. That I could write this kind of thing. That it could be literature. And that I didn't have to do science fiction—although I enjoy science fiction—but that I could root my characters in the real world and utilize the belief system of the place that I'm from. So he was definitely a model. When I think about who my papi is, I think of him for sure.

Emily Woodworth: Were there other authors along the way who had a similar influence on you, or influenced you in different ways than García Márquez?

Tiphonie Yanique: When I think of my total writing-self, I think of Gabriel García Márquez and Jamaica Kincaid. I go to Kincaid for different reasons than I go to García Márquez. Kincaid's way of writing the body is beautiful and politically interesting to me. In particular, I am interested in the kind of agency that women characters have in her work. Agency here is especially radical because her work is often about girls, not even women. Girls don't get a lot of agency in literature, even literature where the girl is the main character. But brown-skinned girls get even less agency in literature! And let's think past literature. Let's think about pop-culture, commercial film. But in Kincaid's work? The agent is often a brown girl: a brown girl from the Caribbean. She's often not American, there is often no relevant awareness of America, even. This is radical. Caribbean people, as people of a unified ethnicity but not of a unified race, are so often disappeared because of the primacy of race to mark tribe in America.

Kincaid doesn't allow that erasure. But still, Kincaid goes further. Because even within Caribbean conversations she allows subjectivity for an often un-subjected space—people from the smaller islands. Antigua. Dominica.

So to me, the fact that Kincaid will have a character who really should be marginalized—has a body and ethnicity and geography that is so easily marginalized—the fact that she makes that body full of agency and subjectivity is kickass. The way that she does that (lyrically, beautifully), and the fact that she does that, has been a real inspiration in my work.

For this particular novel though—it took me eleven years to write, maybe more—when you work that long on any project you're going to have a bazillion influences. So those two are my major ones, but I read so many novels and learned so much from published writers, but also from my peers when I was in grad school. The influences—I could write twenty pages just on the different influences on the novel.

Holly Eck: One question I had: Do you always have stories in the back of your head that you just haven't told yet?

Tiphany Yanique: Yeah. I think if you're a creative person, you're always going to be rolling around multiple stories. I don't believe in writer's block. I think that's bullshit. Writer's block really means that you're just depressed or lazy or really busy or you need to go out and have an adventure. There's just no such thing writer's block itself because it's always linked to something else. But my life is complicated enough and I'm curious enough that I always have multiple other things that I'm dealing with, so there are always multiple stories. I'm also the kind of writer who doesn't write one thing at a time, so I always have multiple



things going at once. So I was writing my novel, but I was also writing my story collection and my collection of poems during that same eleven years. And I have my next novel, which is going to be—tentatively—called *Monster in the Middle*. It's a complex project but it's a project that is about my understanding of how stories work on the individual. The stories you've been told by your family, by your culture, by yourself, are the stories that define who you are.

The novel deals with multiple time periods of this family living on one of the islands. It's a historical love story. It's the idea that even who you choose to love, or who you fall in love with and how you fall in love—what that looks like—comes passed down to you through the generations. The metaphor I'm using is the metaphor of the labyrinth. In some ways, this continues my interest in mythology—though now I'm utilizing Catholic iconography and Greek mythology, in part. In the Greek mythology, there is a monster in the middle of the labyrinth who you have to fight to get out. I think it's Theseus who goes into the labyrinth to kill the minotaur. And he doesn't become a hero until he can kill that minotaur. In Catholicism, the labyrinth is a symbolic and sacred journey taken for meditative and prayerful purpose. I've read that sinners used to journey the labyrinth, often made of stone, on their knees. Now that is a metaphor for love.

Emily Woodworth: So working in so many forms at the same time, do you find you're drawn to one form over another? Or does it just depend on your mood, what story you have to tell?

Tiphonie Yanique: Because I write in multiple genres, I do tend to have very concrete ideas about what each genre does for me. So when I want to write a story I go to fiction—that

sounds obvious—but a lot of poets write narrative poetry and that impulse is not one that is natural to me. So when I want something lyric and imagistic I go to poetry, but it does mean that my poems do tend to be more discursive like dialogue than maybe different kinds of poets because I have this fiction part of my brain as well. And my fiction does tend to be more lyric than some other fiction writers. I'm as interested in where the comma goes or how I stop a sentence, as a poet might be in where the line breaks are, and I obsess about that in the same way. I'm interested in how things sounds musically in my fiction, and what the rhythms are, in the same way a poet might be. So I would say that my interest in both bleed into each other. But it also means that my own sense of what fiction does—from my body, anyway—is different than someone who maybe doesn't write any poetry. So I'm not, for example, as interested in plot as many, many fiction writers are, and I think that comes from being a poet.

Holly Eck: What do you like the best about writing? What do you like the least? And what is the hardest thing about it?

Tiphonie Yanique: The first one is the hardest one. Because I love writing, but it's not that there's a concrete thing that I enjoy about it. It's that I don't really know myself if I'm not producing literature of some kind. I just don't feel my own selfhood in its full vibrancy. So it's not anything particular about the process, it's something holistic about it that tell me that I am being true to myself.

The other ones are easier in a way. There's not much I don't like about writing, but most of it has to do with stupid shit. Like I hate technology. I really don't like technology, I don't like the internet, I don't like computers, I really don't



like the aspects of the writing life that are marketing, like Facebooking.

I don't have anything against those things, and I think they're intellectually interesting and practical modes of communication. I know that new and valuable communities come out of social media. But it's just it's not for *me*. I grew up on a tiny little island where the way people found each other is they knocked on your door. You didn't even really call ahead, you just showed up. So, for me, the internet and these online communities feel like barriers to *my* understanding of real community. Like you have to e-mail somebody because you're going to call them, and then you have to call them because then you're going to come visit, and there are all these things between us and physical, human contact. And that doesn't jive with my personality. And the thing about writing is that it's in part a communication, a reaching out, and I really like things like *this*: I mean, we're talking, we're face to face, we're eating Hawaiian food. But a lot of the writer's life is getting on the Internet and doing Internet interviews and Tweeting and talking about this great event you went to and stuff like that. And it doesn't excite me. In fact, it bores the hell out of me.

Holly Eck: Is there anything difficult about the process?

Tiphonie Yanique: The instructors who teach my work or the critics who review it often identify my main strength as my skill with voice. But voice was something that I worked incredibly hard at because it doesn't come naturally to me. I'm often—I've heard people talk about this in public spaces—praised for being masterful with the first-person form but that actually is not the point of view that comes naturally to me. I have to work really hard at that. What

comes most natural to me is a third-person omniscient voice. A sort of Jane Austen-y type old-school voice comes most organically to me. So I have to work hard at the first person and different kinds of voice in general. But I've never felt that difficulty was unenjoyable. So saying it's hard, for me, isn't saying that it sucks. It actually means that it's kind of awesome, and challenging and fun. And I think I am good at those things now. Which is to say I don't think those people, critics, are making it up. I am good at voice now. But I'm good at it because I worked really hard at it. Not because I have an innate impulse for it.

Emily Woodworth: What is your process as far as idea generation, drafting, revision? How long does it take you to get a short story or novel from start to finish?

Tiphonie Yanique: I'm really mistrustful of writers who answer this question in a nice, succinct way. I think either they don't have a life if they have a set process, or they're just lying to you. Because I have a very complicated life. I have three kids. I'm married. I'm a professor. I'm very dedicated to my professor's work. I love teaching and I'm very invested in my students. And, so that means for me that there's no such thing as a set process. So if that means that I write on the plane to Portland for the half an hour I'm awake on the plane, then that's it. Or maybe I'll revise for a couple of pages, put it away and don't look at it again for weeks. Maybe I generate new material because I just happened to over hear a conversation on the plane that sounded really weird and quirky and I jot notes down for that. That's writing, too. So there's nothing set there for me. Different stories have different jumping points. So I have some stories where I have a line of dialogue in my head for months think,



“this is interesting, maybe this is dialogue I want to utilize.” And then maybe months and months later I’ll think of a character and realize, “oh, these are matched together.” Then I’m having to wonder, okay, this woman is speaking this dialogue, but what’s making that happen? So now I am on to considering plot.

Every story has demanded or required—either because of the story or my life—a different kind of process. And I’m not really precious about that. In the beginning, when I was a student-learner, I used to really obsess and be precious about these magical, mythical narratives about the writer with a special pen and a glass of wine and Mozart playing and all this bullshit, but now I’m not. I’m like, “What kind of nice, privileged bullshit life did you have that you could do that everyday for three hours?” And that’s never been my life. I never had a room of my own. I grew up in a very working-class neighborhood. Working-class is actually a generous way of looking at it. I had a ton of cousins and aunts and uncles who lived in the same house with me and my grandparents. There was never that kind of solitude that we envision for writers—or this image of the writer who’s shy and stays enclosed in her little room. I never had the luxury of that image. That image is a luxury and I never had that. So my answer is that I don’t really have a process. I just write when I can: I guess that’s my process.

I think we’re doing work that is as important as curing cancer, but there’s not an *outcome* like “cancer is cured” waiting at the end. It’s not as clear. It’s art. So the story is “done” or I’ve finally gotten to the apex of the story, but you really don’t know that. You don’t even know that when it’s published as a book. You just never know. The process just continues.

Emily Woodworth: Do you ever self-edit at readings then?

Tiphonie Yanique: Yes.

Emily Woodworth: Do you have a piece of your own that you still love, just your favorite piece that you've written?

Tiphonie Yanique: You know that book that everyone is obsessed with, *The Magical Art of Tidying Up*, by Marie Kondo? I own it. It's this beautiful idea that everything in your house should spark joy in your life. So if you touch it, put your hands on it, it should spark joy. Her thing is imagine if you only lived your life with only things in your home that gave you peace, imagine how wonderful it would be to come home to that refuge after struggling all day through work, racism and sexism, how nice to come home and not have to deal with that shit. For me, I would say that I'm a ruthless writer. I have no problem throwing things away or cutting them and just disappearing them. I'm not precious about, "oh this is a really good scene, so let me force it into this novel." If it's really good, but not for the novel, I'll just cut it. I have enough faith that I'm going to be able to keep generating ideas and new books that I don't feel precious about holding onto things. So I think, to answer your question in a roundabout way, I feel really proud of everything that I write. I feel very strongly about all of it—that I did something important and strong in every piece that I published. And if I don't feel that way, I just won't publish it.

Emily Woodworth: How did you decide to become a writer? When did that click for you?

Tiphonie Yanique: My mother is a poet. Not a famous published poet or anything, but she wrote poetry all growing



up. My grandmother is a librarian, and my grandmother raised me so I grew up around books. So I would say that my whole life I've thought of myself as a writer. And a reader, because I grew up with two women in my life who were incredibly literary and valued books over most other things. I grew up with that sense that books were not only valuable, but also vital and sacred. And I had wonderful teachers throughout even elementary school. Even in first grade and fifth grade I had teachers who would commend me on things. And compliment me on how well I read aloud. So I had a lot of positive reinforcement in my sense of writing and how stories worked.

But I would say that I didn't really think of writing as a career until I got to college and realized it was something that people did as careers. Because the two women I knew who were writers, my mother and grandmother, had never been published writers, so I just had this sense like maybe you had to be dead, or a white guy, or you had to know somebody who owned a printing house. And I knew the Virginia Woolf story where her husband bought her a printing house, so I just didn't have a sense of how it worked—like that you sent your stuff to an agent. I didn't understand that. So it never dawned on me that it could be a career path. And I went into college as a psych major, and at some point I switched over to English. And at some point, because the university I went to didn't have a creative writing major, but it had a creative writing focus. And at some point I thought I'd take those classes, and I was good at them.

My teachers were a big influence on why I became a writer in the professional sense. And that's why I really value my job now, because teaching is a sacred act. You can totally destroy someone as a teacher—and there are a lot of stories

of people doing that—but I think you can completely build somebody as a good teacher too. And I've been the recipient of mostly the good side of that, being built up by mentors and teachers who encouraged me and kept on me to do it.

So when I think of myself as a professor now, I want to be that kind of professor. I want to build people up. I want to build up literature.