

By Molly Boyle

It's In the Telling

AT THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND POETRY,
A FLOWERING OF IDENTITY

In January 20, 2021, when 22-year-old Amanda Gorman read her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden, the pandemic-stricken world sat up and took notice. Gorman’s poetry, which combined nimble wordplay with the hopeful verve of youth at the dawn of a new era, was elevated by her electric delivery of 723 words.

Here are some: “Being American is more than a pride we inherit, it’s the past we step into and how we repair it.”

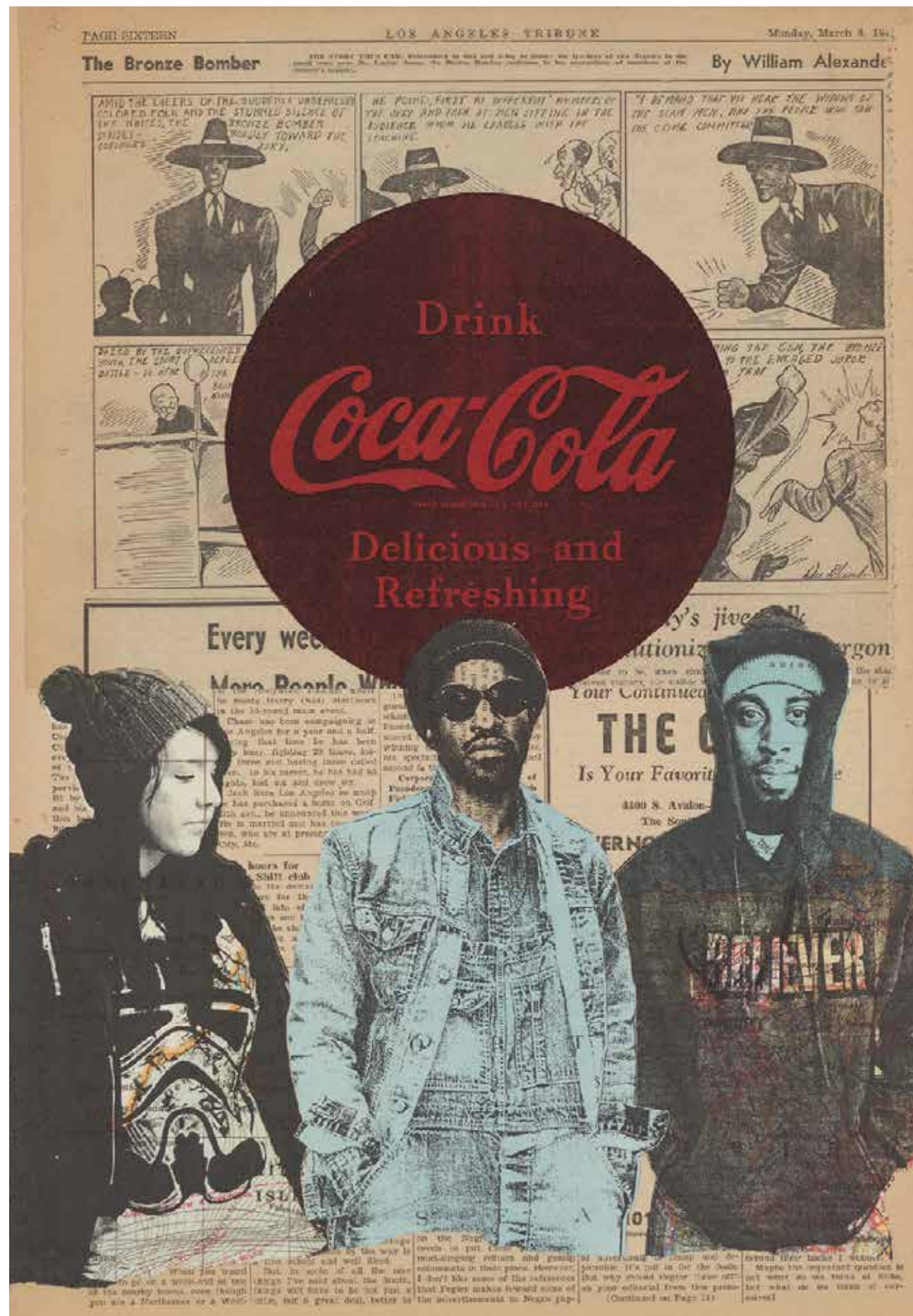
For perhaps the first time on a contemporary stage, the humdrum genre of occasional poetry—or, what ensues when a poet is commissioned to write a poem for a special event—caught international fire. Gorman was the breakout star of the day, although Sen. Bernie Sanders’ much-memed mittens must also be acknowledged. Books she hadn’t published yet, including a bound version of “The Hill We Climb,” rose to the top of Amazon’s bestseller lists. IMG Models signed her for fashion and beauty endorsements. She booked a gig at the Super Bowl and graced the cover of *TIME* magazine.

Meanwhile, in Santa Fe, New Mexico Museum of Art Curator of Contemporary Art Merry Scully was busy devising *Poetic Justice*, on view at the museum through June 19, 2022. The exhibition brings together three pioneering artists—Judith F. Baca, Mildred Howard, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith—to showcase decades of their social justice-focused works.

“The exquisite prose of their visual story telling draws attention to alternate perspectives surrounding community issues such as land use, the environment, housing, civil rights, police brutality, and immigration

Hakim Bellamy.
Photograph by Kevin Lange.





Above: Judith F. Baca, *Red Scare and McCarthyism*, detail reproduction from the 1950s section of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1993. Three sheet lithographs. Courtesy the artist.

Opposite: Mildred Howard, *Millennials & XYZ #IV*, 2014. Monoprint and digital print on collaged found papers. Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer. © Mildred Howard. Photograph by Strode Photographic, LLC.

policy,” Scully writes in the exhibition description. “Painting, installation, film, and monument making are used to relay both history and hope from within and about society.”

The phrase “poetic justice” floated into Scully’s mind one day. Then, perhaps seizing the moment of occasional poetry in the spotlight, she decided to add an extra layer to the exhibition. The New Mexico Museum of Art commissioned three New Mexico poets—2020–2021 New Mexico Poet Laureate Levi Romero, former Albuquerque Poet Laureate Hakim Bellamy, and artist and writer Edie Tsong—to write poems in response to the artists and artworks featured in *Poetic Justice*.

The poems by Bellamy, Romero, and Tsong combine cultural identity and experience, taking those touchstones through the liminal wash-cycle of ekphrasis. “Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the ‘action’ of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning,” explains the Poetry Foundation in its definition of ekphrasis. The result of the ekphrastic exercise is a poem that straddles several mediums, defying boundaries and, in the case of the *Poetic Justice* poems, borders.

How does a poet summon the muse for an assignment that is at once straightforward, with a due date and a stated theme, and wholly abstract? What about the problem of tackling thorny, weighty matters of social justice represented visually, then wrestling them into the floating, imaginary space of a poem?

“The way I work is that you can put a gun to my head and tell me to write a poem, but it’s not gonna happen unless you

want me to write about the gun to my head,” Levi Romero says dryly. Romero, who was appointed as New Mexico’s first poet laureate in 2020, likes to quote what Robert Frost said to John F. Kennedy when the soon-to-be president asked the poet to write an inaugural poem. “They asked him if he had written a poem for the occasion and his reply was no, because ‘I’m not an occasional poet,’” Romero recounts. “‘I’m a full-fledged poet,’ is what he meant. I always play off that when I have the opportunity.”

Hakim Bellamy spins the straw of occasional assignments into poetic gold in his 2021 book *Commissions y Corridos* (University of New Mexico Press). It begins with a language-focused poem titled “One Hundred Years of Corridos: A Song for the New Mexico Centennial.”

It begins:

*In the first chapter
of the Gospel
according to Anaya
Rudolfo writes . . .*

*“All of the older people spoke only Spanish,
And I myself understood only Spanish . . .”*

. . . in English.

*¡Bienvenidos Albuquerque!
I myself understand only English*

. . . in Diné.

For Bellamy, who served as Albuquerque’s first poet laureate in 2012, an ekphrastic poem quickly becomes an identity-based declaration. “You don’t write ‘it’s orange’ because the work is orange,” he explains, delving into his process. “You figure out



Edie Tsong.

Photograph by Kevin Lange.

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what's your personal connection to the color orange, and you try to let the writing stem from that."

As a self-described "oral practitioner" steeped in the quick flow and staccato rhythms of spoken-word poetry, Bellamy relishes the opportunity to write a poem designed as a response to concrete objects, one that people will read and listen to.

"Spoken-word poems that are meant to be performed, you don't have the luxury of someone being able to read it and reread it," he says. "They generally tend to be a bit more literal instead of abstract. And I come from a very political poetry background. A lot of my fare is current events and contemporary analysis. But when you're responding to visual work, you have to go to this imaginative place, which is where the artist went."

Looking over the works in *Poetic Justice*, Bellamy was pulled to examine layers of substance and meaning. He was struck by Mildred Howard's approach to history-based collage in her overlaid images of Black artists and people over newsprint. He was also drawn to Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's mixed-media depictions of Buffalo nickels. "It's a piece of currency. But it's overlaid with a backdrop of earth tones and colors you might see out on the mesa, so there's another layer. And there's another layer: What does money mean? I look at how artists layer, and it's able to have meaning on multiple levels that you can read into."

Bellamy's *Poetic Justice* poem, "Build Your Own Bouquet," references the sediment of the Native American art-making traditions that power Quick-to-See Smith. "Bronzed likeness of mineral and mud. / Made a living from clay," he writes early in the poem.

A later stanza in Bellamy's poem might be a stand-in for an artist's statement that references her identity, be it Indigenous (Quick-to-See Smith), Black (Howard), or Chicana (Baca):

*We are made of what we make.
The way we have learned to replace
all the parts of us
that have been taken away.*

Edie Tsong's poem "How I Became Miss America" also jumps off from the iconography in Quick-to-See Smith's work, particularly her series *Paper Dolls for a Post Columbian World*. One print, *Barbie Plenty Horses*, replaces the plastic Mattel doll with an illustration of a topless Indian maiden. "This is my America," the artist seems to be saying. That was

Levi Romero.

Photograph by Kevin Lange.



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all the inspiration Tsong needed to recall and eventually retell her personal journey to defining beauty and Americanness for herself, on her own terms.

“My parents are from Taiwan, and I was born here,” Tsong explains. “Growing up, people were always questioning my validity as an American.”

Like Bellamy’s poem, Tsong begins hers with clay, referencing the elemental task of creating art.

*In the studio, we use recipes combining different proportions
of dirt
from different parts of the country to make clay bodies. Rooting
my fingers
into the clay, I belong to a composite land, a place of my own
making.*

Tsong’s path to becoming “Miss America” is marked by the verbal punches of her classmates’ slurs and the less-detected subtleties of immigrant erasure. “Wearing the projections of others, I make myself more invisible, until I become / as subtle as a ghost,” she writes. But by the poem’s end, she stands in the fullness (and emptiness) of her adopted identity as Miss America, dressing up to walk city streets in a red Goodwill gown, sash, and blond wig.

Tsong says the poem has its roots in a performance piece she enacted in downtown Portland, Oregon, several years ago, when she walked around for eight hours in a Miss America costume. She describes that experience in the poem:

*By the end
of the day, I am no longer playing
a role or wearing a costume. I am simply Miss
America.
I am missing
America. I am
America.*

Tsong says Quick-to-See Smith’s paper dolls made her reflect on “the costumes we wear, the role-playing we do as human beings. I gave myself permission to tell my story as an artist through these different moments. It made sense in relation to the work in the show.”

Romero similarly describes the process of writing his *Poetic Justice* poem, “Carlos, Prieto, and Ramiro Come to Hoe the Milpa,” as one of internal mining. “The poem is there, but you have to imagine it,”



Above: Jaune Quick-To-See Smith (Citizen of Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation, Montana), *I See Red: Indian Head Nickel*, 1994. Mixed media on canvas, 72 × 72 in. Heard Museum Collection, gift of Lynne and Albion Fenderson, catalog # 4611-1. © Courtesy of the artist and the Garth Greenan Gallery. Photograph by Craig Smith.

Opposite: Judith F. Baca, *La Pachuca*, from the *Las Tres Marías, Vanity Table* performance, 1975. Suite of twelve pigment prints, printed 2009. Courtesy the artist. Photograph by Donna Deitch.

he explains. He knew he wanted to reference certain works by the artists, or even weave their titles into the poem's verbal landscape. But as the deadline approached, he also sought, like Bellamy and Tsong, a way to personalize his response to “memory, history, and emotion,” the broad themes outlined in the exhibition's description.

Mostly, it's about getting a handle on the *feeling* of the art, Romero explains. “I'm searching for what's gonna hit me, where's it gonna come from; where's the emotion that I'm feeling through this artwork?”



“Carlos, Prieto, and Ramiro” takes us into the thought process of the poet laureate who is sitting at his kitchen table in the Embudo Valley, watching three hired Mexican immigrants work the land he grew up on. The poem explains,

*I have been unable to keep up with the gardening
This year and have had to hire help.
I have never hired help before, and I feel as if I
Might be breaking a code-of-honor,
An unstated rule where we are supposed to do everything ourselves,
Even when we can't, even if it kills us.*

The works of Baca appear between the lines, ciphered throughout the poem. “Every day is the First of May, International Day of the Workers,” Romero writes in Spanish. He's referencing Baca's mixed-media Styrofoam sculpture *Primero de Mayo “Big Pancho,”* which is layered with images of the massive immigrant rights protests that swept the nation on May 1, 2006.

The poem continues:

*For others, the days seem
To come and go, thin as a veil of smoke
Swirling from a Pachuca's cigarette.*

That ineffable image comes from the series of Baca photographs entitled *Pachuca Valley Girl*, in which the artist dressed

as an over-the-top Chicana bad girl, sassily blowing a plume of smoke that floats into the camera and over the top of her teased black mane.

“As I'm working through the poem,” Romero explains, “I'm looking for those ways in which the exhibit, the art, the themes, the language—essentially how it all moves through me.” “Carlos, Prieto, and Ramiro” embody the perspectives of hired hands who came from Mexico to work land that once belonged to Mexico. They are akin to the laborers Baca depicts in her monumental San Fernando Valley mural and most well-known artwork, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1978).

“What's wonderful about these kinds of projects is that this is what poets do,” Romero says of *Poetic Justice*. “They work with a language that speaks for what other people are feeling that maybe they can't express themselves. I think what they're asking us to do is to be able to feel something that others are feeling. More specifically, what is the poet feeling, how do they interpret and express that?”

Across the board, Bellamy, Tsong, and Romero filter notions of personal and collective identity—and how they define the idea of “poetic justice”—into their larger definitions of the art of Baca, Howard, and Quick-to-See Smith. When asked how he sees poetic justice, or community activism, in his own work, Romero replies, “I think it was Joy Harjo who said that the real revolution is love.” He nourishes that place-based love in his work through the verbal rhythms and traditional landscapes of born-here-all-their-lives New Mexicans.

Tsong's poetic depiction of her personal journey as an artist is inspired by the pioneering spirit of the artists in *Poetic Justice*, who also define art on their own terms. “By telling my story and talking about my own experience, I think there's this social justice that's built in. It's in the telling that I'm making space for myself,” she says.

Bellamy, too, says he identified strongly with the artists' non-mainstream perspectives. “I think of them coming into the museum world, which was not always friendly to stories of women and people of color. We might come from a community where we don't even have a word for art, because we don't look at it as a commodity or something that we do for money. It's part of our culture.”

“We sing every day, we make pottery every day, we paint every day,” he says, adopting the familiar percussion of a spoken-word poem. “That's who we are. We don't separate it from ourselves.” ■

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