

## Trauma, Affect, Memory and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Poetry

Cristina A. Bejan\* in Conversation with Arleen Ionescu\*\*

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### Abstract

This interview with contemporary poet and historian Cristina A. Bejan, conducted over email, examines several contemporary meanings of 21<sup>st</sup>-century poetry through a personal lens. The interview starts from Bejan's academic work and continues with her creative work, focusing on her 'spoken word' in the volume *Green Horses on the Wall*, published in 2020 and translated in Romanian this year. Notions such as memory, trauma, affect that represent the core of Bejan's poetry are explained by the poet in relation to her poetics.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup>-century poetics, spoken word poetry, intellectuals in the 1930s, trauma, exile, memory, Romanian diaspora in the USA

**Arleen Ionescu:** *Dear Cristina, I have known your academic work since 2019 when I read your book on the Criterion Association and I also had the honour to review it for SLOVO, a journal edited by University College London dealing with the political, social, economic and cultural affairs of Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> I was fascinated by your research skills, which made your investigation both very rich and concise at the same time. The epoch that you so minutely analysed in this book was characterized by uncanny paradoxes, and the young and brilliant intellectuals who established the Criterion Association in the thirties in Romania meant it as a platform under whose aegis conferences, symposia, artistic events/exhibitions took place, displaying 'an array of new ideas in politics, economics, music, art, culture, philosophy, architecture, literature and more, from within and outside Romania'.<sup>2</sup> However, with Romania becoming Hitler's ally during World War II, many of these intellectuals became (more or less) ardent supporters of fascism and Nazism, an aspect which has sometimes been neglected by some prominent Romanian researchers who either found them excuses or chose to ignore their support of the Iron Guard as well as the tendentious part of their creation, like, among many others, Emil Cioran's articles praising Hitler or Schimbarea la față a României [The Transfiguration of Romania], as well as Mircea Eliade's articles on Mussolini. When I read your book, the first thing that impressed me profoundly was your objectivity which made me assert the following: 'Perhaps the best characterization of Bejan's position in her insightful analysis would*

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<sup>1</sup> Arleen Ionescu, 'Review of Cristina A. Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association* (2019)', *SLOVO* 33.1 (Summer 2020): 27-9.

<sup>2</sup> Cristina A. Bejan, *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania: The Criterion Association* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), 85. See book launch 'Lansare de carte Cristina Bejan la Chicago'; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-Vzb1h88ME> [accessed 23 November 2022].

*be fairness and a highly ethical commitment'.<sup>3</sup> I meant every word of it, myself being a Holocaust researcher who has read so many apologetic or nearly apologetic accounts of prominent intellectuals in the thirties both in Romania and other European countries. So, as a preamble to our discussion on poetry, my question for you is how can an intellectual get to this sense of truth and objectivity?*

**Cristina Bejan:** Dear Arleen, I think my work in Romanian history benefits from me being American not as personally connected to this history but as someone who has an emotional distance from the subject. I am not invested in whether Eliade was a Fascist; I am just presenting the facts as I found them. That said, I do think it is important that I am half-Romanian: my Romanian heritage and identity makes me care about the lives and legacies of the figures that I have studied. I think that an abstract, American, almost-anthropological approach can hurt the telling of Romanian history. I see it all the time with American academics who make their career by Orientalizing, other-izing and exoticizing Romania. So, I think my dual national identities and my Oxford training as a historian provided sound footing to tell the story of Criterion and its members. And I am also telling their story because I want it to be told and accessible to the English-speaking world. Another aspect that benefits me as a storyteller is my theatre background and training. I bring this into the history classes that I teach: the importance of employing our imagination to put ourselves in the shoes of the historical figures. This develops empathy so that we do not judge the historical figures through a present-day lens but rather try to understand what they were going through and why they made the decisions that they did. I have empathy for all the figures in my history book, and it has been a great honour to tell their story.

**AI:** *As you know, I am doing this interview with you for an issue of Word and Text that deals with contemporary poetry written in English. It is now a privilege for me to present this part of your creative work to the readers of our journal.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the many plays that you have written, you have published a splendid volume of poetry entitled Green Horses on the Walls,<sup>5</sup> which received several awards: the 2021 Independent Press Book Award, the 2021 Human Relations Indie Book Award, and which was a finalist for both the 2021 Indie Book Award Next Generation and the 2021 Colorado Authors League Book Award.<sup>6</sup> My question would be: how do you define yourself as a fully accomplished young Romanian-American scholar with a PhD in Oxford, a theatre artist and a 'spoken word' poet who works across several cultures*

<sup>3</sup> Ionescu, 29.

<sup>4</sup> See Cristina A. Bejan's YouTube Channel; available at <https://www.youtube.com/@cristinaabejan> [accessed 23 November 2022]. Among Bejan's poetry videos, see 'Cristina A. Bejan (Lady Godiva) at Busboys & Poets - Brookland, 2016', 12 August 2021, which presents Bejan's Vanuatu poems and speaks about Bucharest Inside the Beltway in Washington DC; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XDD9miStPo&t=67s> [accessed 23 November 2022]; Bejan's spoken word poem entitled 'Tricky Diaspora', Denver, Colorado, 12 September 2020; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCSX8DorpCg> [accessed 23 November 2022]; her 'Lady Godiva ~ NYC Debut' at the Romanian Cultural Institute of New York, 4 March 2021; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HalXmTtT5tM> [accessed 23 November 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Cristina A. Bejan, *Green Horses on the Wall* (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2020). See the virtual 'Book launch for *Green Horses on the Walls* by Cristina A. Bejan @IMURJ', 7 August 2020; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3OB57fgeVY&t=111s> [accessed 23 November 2022].

<sup>6</sup> Information retrieved from Cristina A. Bejan's personal website 'Cristina A. Bejan | Historian, Theatre Artist, Poet'; available at <https://www.cristinaabejan.com/video> [accessed 15 November 2022].

*and brings into her work, both academic and creative, this mixture of cultural landscapes?*

**CB:** I am a multi-hyphenate creative and thinker. I believe that sums up my cultural, linguistic, nerdy and artistic dimensions. I love that I have written so many plays, but I always quickly correct people when they call me a playwright. I am a theatre artist and work in all dimensions of theatre: director, producer, actor, playwright, dramaturg, sound designer, dialect coach – you name it, I have worn the hat. And I have been a theatre artist for 30 years and have worked with some of the most well-known professional theatre festivals, companies, and venues in the United States. I am now a Professor of Theatre (in addition to History), and I am still an active theatre artist without an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) in Theatre. I never set out to become a poet, but I fell into the spoken word universe of Washington DC (truth be told, they caught me). And I was doing all this while I was a researcher at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. My daily work was as a historian sifting through archival materials in twelve languages and writing scholarly articles about lesser-known Holocaust camps and ghettos. During this time, I had a hit play produced in DC called *Districtland* that sold out at a local festival and was bought for TV development. Rucsandra Pop and I also launched the arts collective Bucharest Inside the Beltway (BiB) at the Romanian Embassy to the US. I use this historical moment in my life to demonstrate that I was not just one label; I will never be one label. Admittedly because I don't fit into a particular societal box, some people may be turned off. But I will remain true to myself because I start and end each day with myself, and I want to feel good about the contribution I make to the world. And if I must wear any badges, I proudly wear those of: Romanian-American woman, Romania's only Rhodes Scholar, third in my family to earn a PhD and iconoclast.

**AI:** *As we know, your book's title, Green Horses on the Walls, translates the Romanian idiom cai verzi pe pereți, which would seem very weird to Americans. How did they welcome this title and how much did you have to explain it to them?*

**CB:** My father said this expression 'green horses on the walls' (in English) to me growing up. My siblings and I were not raised speaking Romanian because of the Cold War: there seemed to be no point of learning the language of a country we would never see. We didn't know any Romanians in North Carolina, and my mother is American, so we were raised with English as our mother tongue. I knew what my father meant with 'green horses on the walls' – he wanted me to be serious and focus on a traditional professional path. I was living in Romania and learning Romanian in the 2000s where I learned that this idiom was pervasive in his home country and that I wasn't alone in hearing it. In terms of the English language audience, I have never gotten a question about it, and I assume that is because the title poem of the collection *Green Horses on the Walls* explains exactly what it means: in both English and Romanian (it is a bilingual poem). Since the book's release, I have met many people who feel this struggle and pressure from their parents: mostly children of immigrants. The expression has been a reason for solidarity with readers. And I do want to give my father credit: he was never totally wrong. I am really proud that I have been able to 100% support myself as a researcher and professor while nurturing my creative pursuits. If he hadn't warned

me about chasing ‘green horses on the walls’, I would not have an academic career (not a bad ‘day-job’!), nor an award-winning poetry book titled *Green Horses on the Walls*.

**AI:** I read the review of your poetry book published by Letiția Guran in *Observator Cultural*, where she mentions that those who do not know you from social media and the different groups of spoken word or slam poetry would not guess that beyond the book cover on which your elegant grandmother was taking a walk with her husband and brother, your discourse is mainly an existential one in which personal history is only a pretext.<sup>7</sup> I agree with Guran as well as with Irina Moga who defined your book as ‘a poignant quest for identity that transforms the rawness of everyday events and unbearable trauma into a fluid and polyphonic poetic discourse’,<sup>8</sup> and I could see that exile narratives are inscribed in your work. Michael Seidel defined exile stories as signifying a dual consciousness of displacement, and mentioned that their authors inhabit one place, while remembering or projecting the reality of another.<sup>9</sup> The theme of exile also brings together two languages, which we can see even before reading your poetry, which has titles both in English and Romanian. Am I right in assessing your book in this way?

**CB:** Exile is certainly at the core of my scholarly and creative work. I am a product of my father’s exile from Romania – he left in 1969 and stayed in the States, breaking Romanian law and becoming an ‘Enemy of the State’. I grew up very aware of the horrors he and his family endured in Romania at the hands of the communist regime. I could tell that he was different from other fathers in my North Carolina city – that he carried a great burden, and I have devoted my adult life to understanding that burden. My PhD topic (my dissertation became my history book *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania*) finds its origins in my father’s bedtime stories to me and my sister in the 1980s. He told us how our grandparents (his parents: Anghel Bejan and Marioara Ene) met as students at the University in Bucharest in the ‘30s – how they were the first in their families to attend college. ‘Romania was free then, girls’, he would say, and proceed to explain that fascism and then communism would supplant democracy. I wanted to understand how Romania’s interwar democracy collapsed. As an undergraduate at Northwestern University, I had a professor of French (the award-winning poet Stella Vinitchi Radulescu<sup>10</sup> in fact!) who introduced me to the works of Eliade, whom she knew personally as part of the exiled South Side of Chicago Romanian literati in the 80s. I was a philosophy and theatre double major, writing my Honors philosophy thesis on the applicability of Kantian autonomy to newly free

<sup>7</sup> Letiția Guran, ‘Nu doar „Cai verzi pe pereti”’, *Observator Cultural* 1061 (2021), available at <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/nu-doar-cai-verzi-pe-pereti/> [accessed 15 November 2022]. Other reviews of Bejan’s poetry include Carmen Bugan, ‘Green Horses on the Walls’, *The Paddock Review*; available at <https://paddockreview.com/2021/01/12/green-horses-on-the-walls/> [accessed 23 November 2022]. Roxana Cazan, ‘Microreview: Cristina A. Bejan’s *Green Horses on the Walls*’, *Indiana Review*, 10 July 2020; available at <https://indianareview.org/2020/07/microreview-cristina-a-bejan-green-horses-on-the-walls/> [accessed 23 November 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Irina Moga, ‘Book Review: *Green Horses on the Wall* by Cristina A. Bejan’, *Cloud Lake Literary*, 17 July 2021; available at <https://www.cloudlakeliterary.ca/blogposts/book-review-green-horses-on-the-walls-by-cristina-a-bejan> [accessed 23 November 2022].

<sup>9</sup> Michael Seidel, *Exile and the Narrative Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), ix.

<sup>10</sup> See Stella Vinitchi Radulescu’s bio, *UniVerse: A United Nations of Poetry*, n. d.; available at <https://www.universeofpoetry.org/romania.shtml> [accessed 23 November 2022].

democratic societies. Post-1989 Romania was my case study. I knew of Cioran from my philosophy studies and Ionesco from my theatre studies. The big Romanian three and their post-WWII global fame were all products of exile to the West. How can we forget the famous photo session of the three friends in Paris in the late 1970s? My PhD became an attempt to answer the question of how great minds could flirt with fascism (knowing Ionesco definitely did not) and contribute to democracy's demise. In my research I discovered the Romanian-side of the story: the genius minds who did not succeed in escaping. Petru Comarnescu, the fervent democrat, LGBTQIA+ icon and father of the Criterion Association, became the one whom I have always called 'my best friend who I will never meet'. My dissertation turned book is an attempt to tell his story and the story of Criterion, which operated at the moment Eliade and company fell to the political Right. And by telling the story, I arrive at some observations as of how fascism can appeal to the educated elite in society, while also shining a spotlight on such local greats such as Mihail Sebastian, and lesser known yet troubling cases of fascism such as Marietta Sadova.

**AI:** *Seeing your book cover, I immediately thought of what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, silently adapting Zygmunt Bauman's notion of 'liquidity',<sup>11</sup> called 'liquid time'; they talked about 'photographs that keep developing in unforeseen directions when they are viewed and re-viewed by different people in different presents', and asserted that '[i]n "liquid time" they are not fixed into static permanence, rather they remain dynamic, unfixed, as they acquire new meanings, in new circumstances.'*<sup>12</sup> Tell us the story of your book cover.

**CB:** The cover of my poetry book *Green Horses on the Walls* is a black and white family photo of my Romanian grandparents and great-uncle Aurelian strolling through Cișmigiu Park in central Bucharest circa 1936. My grandfather is wearing a military jacket because he was on an army scholarship studying in the Veterinary Faculty at the University of Bucharest. My grandmother was studying in the Faculty of Pharmacy. Under communism, both my father's parents disappeared respectively at different intervals for being 'intellectuals' – merely educated peasants who refused to join the Communist Party. It was this family history that led my grandmother to tell my father when he won a government scholarship to study in the United States in 1969 to 'never come home'. My father's defection led to constant Securitate surveillance of my family on both sides of the Atlantic, from Boston to Galați. So, in a sense, I grew up living in a sort of exile and thus came to write about exile in terms of the greatest thinkers in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Romanian history as a historian, as well as exile in my own family history as an artist and spoken word poet.

**AI:** *I myself have been working on several memoirs of Shanghai Jewish refugees during World War II. Exploring these memoirs, I was amazed that even nowadays some historians tend to discard their value, because the memoirists do not document the historical event per se, but rather concentrate on their families' lives. To me every individual memory becomes part of our collective memory that teaches us how to cope*

<sup>11</sup> The first and still most famous use of this concept is to be found in his *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *School Photos in Liquid Time: Reframing Difference* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 13.

with trauma, how to work through traumatic experiences. When you let your ‘memories lie untouched’,<sup>13</sup> as phrased by one of these refugees I deal with in my own work, there is always an apparent gain that you will not relive a traumatic experience, which might provoke ‘intense emotional distress’, as Judith Herman asserted.<sup>14</sup> However, this gain is only at the superficial level, since one never manages to work through one’s traumatic experiences, and it is only by opening that wound that one can heal. I read beyond the lines of your poetry about some very traumatic experiences of your family that you somehow inherited at the level of ‘postmemory’, to use Marianne Hirsch’s term. Do you agree that the moment those unhappy memories become part of our collective memory, once the writer puts them on paper the healing of these past wounds has started? Or if you think otherwise, could you share with us your opinion about this relation between memory, trauma and poetry?

**CB:** I think my response to this question is informed by my work as PhD fellow and researcher for four years at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In order to preserve memory, we need to document what happened. We need to document the past to honour the victims and also to educate people today and future generations. We need to educate in order to prevent such atrocities from repeating. Yes, writing spoken word poetry became a vehicle of healing my inherited and lived trauma, but it has also proven to be a mode of documentation, education and prevention. We have made huge strides in terms of Holocaust education in the USA, but where is the Gulag education? By sharing my family’s story in the prose poem ‘Opening the Orange Envelope’, I honour their memory and also their published story can be a lesson to us all about the reality of totalitarianism and, in Romania’s case, ‘communism’. Sharing my family’s story is oral history; it is memory, it is processing trauma, it is documentation. And, ultimately, I hope it is a cry for us all to NEVER FORGET: a message used so well when we discuss the Holocaust. Those of us who are the descendants of survivors of crimes of communism need to step up and adopt the mantra. By telling our families’ stories, we can be part of the prevention of further crimes against humanity.

**AI:** Your book of poetry has just been translated into Romanian by Mădălina Mangalagiu and published by Editura Tracus Arte this year.<sup>15</sup> How do you feel about becoming known in Romania as well? Do you envisage any other future collaborations in Romania?

**CB:** This is a very meaningful question. In fact, I have been collaborating with creatives in Romania since I lived there from 2007-2009 on a Fulbright studying at the University of Bucharest, conducting research for my Oxford DPhil (PhD). And in retrospect, my collaborations began in the ‘90s. I remember vividly when Duke Professor Kristine Stiles brought Lia and Dan Perjovschi to Durham, NC. I was in high school at the time. My friendship with the Perjovschis has continued, and it was thanks to Lia that I procured the first venue (Teatrul Foarte Mic) for the staged reading of my play *Colombo*

<sup>13</sup> I. Betty Grebenshikoff, *Once My Name Was Sara: A Memoir* (Ventnor, NJ: Original Seven Publishing Company, 1993), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Cristina A. Bejan, *Cai verzi pe pereți*, trans. Mădălina Mangalagiu (Bucharest, Editura Tracus Arte, 2022).

*Calling: A Play from Sri Lanka* in 2008. The show starred Maia Morgenstern and featured many emerging actors, with the symbolic support of Leslie Hawke and Adity Chakravarti (visual artist and wife of the then-Ambassador of India to Romania). Due to the success of that play, I reached the radar of cultural mover-and-shaker Rucsandra Pop (also anthropologist, playwright, poet and more), who invited *Colombo Calling* to appear in her performative literary series at ‘Museo Café’ (a hip creative gathering space in the Geology Museum). I was very intimidated by her, as this was an official entry into ‘the literary scene’, and I naturally accepted. My play’s appearance in this series was a massive success, and Rucs and I began a lifelong collaboration. At that moment, we had an idea for an international artistic platform inspired by the fearless spirit of Bucharest creatives. We developed it across the Atlantic (and also the Pacific at one point), and in 2014, we launched (as co-founders) our all-arts grass-roots platform Bucharest Inside the Beltway (BiB) in Washington DC. Since then, we have produced and promoted countless arts and culture events in the USA and Romania: theatre, dance, visual art, literature, spoken word poetry, all either local or international. (We avoid at all costs the siloed, rubber-stamp, traditional, commercial projects, which are ‘successful’ on the national American stage. Rather we support independent artists, who still have the fearless cutting-edge spirit that inspired BiB’s creation.) Point being: I am not new to the Bucharest arts scene: if anything, I start each day inspired by it when I do Bucharest Inside the Beltway’s daily arts feature on social media.

As I type this, my poetry is being presented (in Romanian and English) in Rucs’s performative installation ‘Orice Moarte Este Poartă’ at ART HUB in Bucharest (November 2022). Yet, despite this ongoing presence and awareness that I have had since I left Romania in 2009, your question is an excellent one when it comes to my new role: author published in the Romanian language by an esteemed Romanian press for solely a Romanian audience. When I announced *Cai verzi pe pereți* to my family and friends, it felt heavier than my previous works published in English, which required significant self-reflection and introspection. My book is largely about Romania and my family’s difficult history in Romania. I have a lot of inherited trauma from the crimes of communism that is unpacked in the book. And ever since the 1989 Romanian Revolution, I have been in search of my Romanian identity. Growing up in the ‘Brooklyn of the South’ (Durham, NC), I knew that my father had an accent audible to other people that I could not hear myself. It was the Cold War, and we never believed we would meet our family in Romania. I felt like I didn’t know a part of me, and once I started going to Romania on my own in the 2000s, I began to discover myself. So now my poetry is in the land and language of my self-discovery, inspired by the friends and family who were part of that journey. That’s pretty heavy, isn’t it? Another reason this book means so much is that I write poetry in a genre (spoken word) that American poets do not accept as ‘real poetry’. All these poems were performed in community spaces of activism, which were mostly African-American. When my poetry book came out in the United States, the print poetry world did not accept it because I did not go the conventional route of paying a mountain of debt for an MFA. I never paid my dues with poetry gatekeepers here in the US. Now that the book is published by the best press in Romania for poetry (Editura Tracus Arte), I feel that it is vindication: that even a spoken word poet can be a REAL poet. It’s a huge (and heavy) response to the American doubters and detractors. Also, I want to give a major shout-out to the book’s translator Mădălina Mangalagiu, who did an exquisite job with the Romanian translation. And

none of this would have been possible without editor Teodor Dună, who accepted the book and handled the subject matter with understanding and grace.

**AI:** *What topics does your book cover?*

**CB:** The topics covered in *Cai verzi pe pereți* are tough for any audience, but I imagine will be more difficult in Romania than in the US. In addition to crimes of communism, my poems are largely about mental health and sexual assault. When I lived through the horrors of the latter two themes, they were still very much taboo topics in the US. But then #MeToo happened in 2017 and it became much more accepted to talk about them. I believe my book would never have been published if it weren't for #MeToo: I would not have had the courage to publish it. I look forward to the conversations this book might start in Romania surrounding these issues. I also look forward to launching the book myself in March 2023 over my university's Spring Break. After the official Editura Tracus Arte book launch in Bucharest, I will take my poetry on a spoken word tour across a few cities in Romania. I had this idea after the mayor of Sibiu, Astrid Fodor, invited me to perform my poems at the Durham-Sibiu Sister City Zoom poetry event featuring Radu Vancu, Andrei Codrescu and myself in 2021. I am really looking forward to this spoken word tour as I think it is the perfect introduction to my poems in Romania and also exposure to the art of spoken word poetry (which is distinct from Romanian performance poetry).

**AI:** *Do you have any follow-up events planned in Romania?*

**CB:** I do have a follow-up book planned for Romania. My history book *Intellectuals and Fascism in Interwar Romania* will appear in 2023, translated by National Archives Director Alina Pavelescu and published by Editura Litera. This project was significantly delayed due to the Ukraine-Russia War. I look forward to entering the Romanian literary space as a historian as well. And I do anticipate extreme responses to my history book as everyone in Romania has an opinion about Mircea Eliade and company, and the book has a chapter about LGBTQIA+ history, which I imagine might be a difficult topic for some readers.

**AI:** *Dear Cristina, we are living in a century that has been quite harsh to us, to put it mildly. In only 22 years we have been experiencing wars, climate change, natural disasters, all sorts of economic and political crises, democracies being threatened, COVID-19 pandemic making our lives hell. Do you see poetry as a step towards healing all our collective wounds in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Can we think of poetry as bringing back affect and making us care about the other more? Or in other words, why do you write poetry in this century?*

**CB:** Spoken word poetry is a form of activism and mine is no exception. Spoken word often addresses difficult societal and political issues in a way rarely attempted by traditional print poetry. As I have learned by publishing my poetry book, print poetry is more concerned with the look of the poem on the page: e.g. line breaks. Spoken word poets care more about the content of their message than whether it follows some standard format. Another important component about spoken word is that it is shared live, in community spaces. Spoken word needs an audience, but not in a traditional

theatre sense. Spoken word manifests in a space ready to grapple with hard issues. I could never have written my poems without the nurturing community spaces I was so fortunate to be part of in Washington DC and Raleigh, NC.

So, to explicitly answer your question: in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need more safe community spaces and fewer gatekeepers. Unfortunately, with the professionalization of creative writing, there are more gatekeepers. There were no MFA programs in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but American universities create them now to make easy money. And if you don't have an MFA, then you are deemed not a poet in the US. This is why we need more people to eschew that societal expectation, and this is why I absolutely love social media. I believe that the technology democratizes the playing field for artists. I witness it every day with actors with whom I have worked who are now established TikTok comedians. I see it on my own Instagram where I share my poetry. And of course, BiB social media would not be possible without the artists' accounts themselves. I hope that as the 21<sup>st</sup> century moves forward, we see more such technological platforms manifesting so that people can continue to share their creativity across the world. I do believe that this globalized interconnectedness can unite us as we see each other's shared humanity. It is also important from the human rights angle, as we can see crimes against humanity perpetrated by Russia and Iran in real-time. My friend and anti-fascism activist in Brazil posted about the recent Colorado Springs LGBTQIA+ hate crime even before I did. I firmly believe these windows into real-life will ultimately move the world in a more humane direction.

Of course, there is the argument that technology is dividing us: people communicate more via their devices than they do in person. However, the technology is not going anywhere, so we should look at improving our use of it. I always share this quote with my students from South African anti-Apartheid activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Desmond Tutu: 'Do your little bit of good where you are. Those little bits of good put together will overwhelm the world.' This takes us back to community spaces, whether that be a spoken word open mic, comic impersonation TikTok, poetry Instagram, classroom, or family dinner table. You don't have to be president or a celebrity to change the world; rather, do good where you are in a way that gives your life meaning.

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## **Traumă, afect, memorie și poezia secolului XXI**

Acest interviu cu poeta contemporană și istoricul Cristina A. Bejan, realizat prin email, examinează câteva înțelegeri contemporane ale poeziei secolului XXI, dintr-o perspectivă personală. Interviul pornește de la volumul academic publicat de Bejan și continuă cu partea creativă a operei sale, concentrându-se asupra genului poeziei orale [*spoken word*] din volumul *Cai verzi pe pereți*, publicat în 2020 și tradus în limba română în acest an. Noțiuni precum memoria, trauma, afectul care reprezintă centrul poeziei lui Bejan sunt explicate de poetă în relație cu poetica sa.