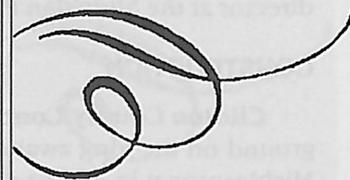


IN STEP WITH INDIANA AUTHORS...
FEATURING AN INTERVIEW WITH
EUGENE GLORIA

by Jacob Eubanks



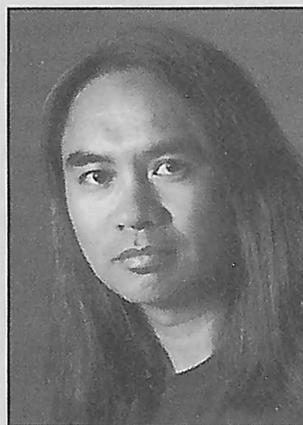
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ugene Gloria is an award winning poet whose work includes *Drivers at the Short-Time Motel* (1998) and *Hoodlum Birds* (2006). Eugene was born in Manila, Philippines, the youngest of six siblings.

He immigrated to the United States at the age of eight, and grew up in San Francisco, California. Eugene was raised by a family of educators and lawyers, so when he began to pursue his education he went to school with the intention of becoming a lawyer. He earned his BA at San Francisco State University in political science and English literature. After graduation, Eugene went to work for the California bar. After several years, he was ready to return to school, this time to become a teacher. Eugene accepted a scholarship to Miami University to study English literature. Eugene had no ambition to become a writer, but there was always a desire. It wasn't until he found a book by an immigrant writer, while on a trip home to San Francisco, that he realized his own potential. Upon completion of his MA degree, he learned that Garrett Hongo, an immigrant writer, was teaching creative writing at the University of Oregon.

Eugene moved to Oregon, and Garrett Hongo took Eugene under his wing. Eugene finally felt like he was developing the structure necessary to have a successful career as a writer. While at Oregon, Eugene received a Fulbright Fellowship and spent two years in his native Philippines researching local folklore. From this experience, he developed the award-winning, *Drivers at the Short-Time Motel*. The collection was a critical success, and Eugene received the Asian American Literary Award in 2000, and his collection of poetry was selected for the National Poetry Series in 1999. Eugene completed his second poetry collection, *Hoodlum Birds*, in 2000. Eugene's poetry has been published in numerous publications including: *The North American Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Gettysburg Review*. Eugene has been a guest on *Profiles*, a program produced by National Public Radio. He is a professor of creative writing at DePauw University and lives with his wife, Karen, in Greencastle, Indiana.

I recently visited with Eugene in his office at DePauw University. The following is a transcript from



that interview. The questions I posed are in bold-faced type and are followed by his responses.

You've done a great deal of traveling and have studied at several universities. Can you talk about your educational journey?

Originally I studied political science and English literature. I had no real ambition of being a writer. I come from a family of educators and lawyers. I did my undergraduate work at San Francisco State University and went to work for the California bar association in preparation for law school. I felt undisciplined and unstructured. I never felt like I could ever write as well as the authors we read in my undergraduate courses: Hemingway, Faulkner. All of my friends in San Francisco were artists, and I didn't talk to them about writing. I worked for the bar for a while, but I felt like I was in a dead end job, and I decided I was ready to go to grad school. I started applying and almost went to Columbia University in New York. New York was an amazing place. San Francisco was so different in comparison. In New York, there were artists working everywhere, and there was so much activity. I was accepted into the teacher's college at Columbia.

I was all ready to move to New York when I was contacted by Miami University, Ohio. I really liked New York, but I decided to visit Ohio. I'd never been to a Midwest city or to a Midwestern college, and I was awed. As much as I wanted to go to New York, I chose to go to Miami. I liked the feel of the Midwest, and they offered to pay for my education. After I finished my degree, I found out that Garrett Hongo was teaching at the University of Oregon. I was really interested in how to become successful as a writer, and here was this person just like me, and he was very successful. I still felt undisciplined and unstructured. So I decided to go there and work on a MFA in creative writing and Garrett took me under his wing.

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I didn't start thinking about it until I was a grad student. I always read and enjoyed writers. I remember I was in this small bookstore in San Francisco. There aren't many of these now. Small stores like this. I saw a collection of work by Jessica Hagedorn, *Pet Food & Tropical Arrangements*. I was reading the book, her subjects were about Filipinos. American Filipinos. Smokey Robinson. Here's this writer writing about this and I was encouraged. Here's this contemporary writer, and she was an immigrant just like me. Having Garrett as a teacher, he turned me onto other immigrant writers. Authors concerned with *Hyphenated Identity*. Displacement themes you find as natural subjects from immigrant writers.

You were a Fulbright Scholar?

Yes, as a grad student, I was interested in folklore study on family folk narratives. I returned to Manila, Philippines, for two years, visiting older relatives about stories and folklore. I intended to write a book on these stories, but when I arrived, I made so many new contacts with colleagues, people writing in English. It was an exciting time. It distracted me from my project. I decided to publish a collection of these English language Filipino works that writers were producing. This didn't happen. I was beaten to the punch. However, the product of that experience became my first book, the poems in *Drivers at the Short-Time Motel*. The collection of poetry was a direct response of the things I was experiencing, things I was thinking about; subjects about my family, San Francisco, the folklore and family stories. It was about being an immigrant.

I think in poetry you end up writing about fictive things, but autobiographical things slip through. Part of it is creating a fictional persona. I was raised Catholic with two older brothers and three older sisters. In the first book I wrote a lot about one of my brothers, because he was a Vietnam veteran, and I was fascinated with his stories and his non-stories. He never talked about his experiences much. My family members and family subjects emerge more in the second collection.

Could you talk about your method and approach to writing?

I do my best writing when I'm not teaching. Teaching is a wonderful profession, and I love it dearly, but you pay a price because you are so focused on spending time working with your students. I spend my breaks trying to get away. There's an artist colony in the Santa Cruz Mountains; people feed you, and clean for you and just take care of daily things, and you're provided with the time to actually work. It's just amazing. You're in this beautiful place, with amazing food, and it's like heaven. I write an hour or two a day, when I am home, but I'm able to really concentrate when I escape. I can focus.

In terms of process and methods, writing poetry, or any literature, is a continuation of reading. For me, writing is a conversation, as I read writers that I love; it becomes a collaboration in a way. I read constantly, and I develop my ideas from reading other's work. Garrett wrote with a street vernacular and was a classically trained poet. My childhood wasn't overly educated, my family didn't read much, and I think what echoes in my voice is my response to the environment and what I'm reading. I always tell my students to "Pay attention, read a lot." You also have to divorce yourself from your stories. That way, you can see things clearer. You find yourself responding to your own environment and projecting yourself as a writer.

An overriding theme in your poetry seems to be the act of human "migration." As an immigrant and a world traveler, how have your travels influenced what you write?

I think that the idea of the writer is outside, displaced, misplaced somehow. The Spanish landscape is very familiar to me, and still when visiting, it feels like I'm a stranger. What I write often times reflects what it feels like to be me. The idea of birds and hands became a motif in *Hoodlum Birds*; birds referring to the idea of poetry. There's a quote, "nest of birds, rest of the mind," I don't remember where I read it, but it's an idea that came out of Native American lore.

You've mentioned Garrett Hongo and Jessica Hagedorn. Could you discuss any other influences?

There are so many! The poets I love wrote about place. Poets like James Wright and Ohio. Richard Hugo writes about backwater towns in Montana. These poets have influenced my travelling. Being at a university that supports my travelling is one of the great things about teaching at DePauw. William Carlos Williams was one of my favorites. He really privileged the language; his plain spoken poetry. I loved the aesthetic, poetry developed from plain spoken language. It sounds so simple, but it's so difficult to unravel and get at that plain language! He really was one of my favorites.

What are you currently reading?

Most of what I'm reading has been for class. I like to make sure I'm as prepared as my students. So I don't have much time for personal reading. I just read *Divisadero* by Michael Ondaatje. He's a Sri Lankan Canadian. He wrote *The English Patient* which I really loved. I also just bought a Paul Bowels novel.

What is the importance of poetry to human beings?

I think it's the necessary nothing, that for me, I can't live without. What is the point of art? You know, there's this line of Nietzsche, "We have art so that we shall not be destroyed by truth." I think you can

translate that as a reason for poetry in our world. Writing, art, are really acts of the imagination. Imagining is necessary.

What have libraries meant to you in your life?

Huge! I was just telling my wife, that I want to go back to the small library back in San Francisco I used to go to. It was this wonderful place I used to go, and find books, not on poetry, or novels, but books on things like magic. This was when I was very young. It was this wonderful place that I would love to return to and write about.

The library to me is a great place to go and hide, and read and just relax and enjoy. I just did a workshop at the Putnam Library in Greencastle, and I had the kids reading about place. I had them reading Richard Hugo, *Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg* and James Wright, *Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio*. I assigned them to write a poem about place. To me the library is the kind of place where image can take flight; it's just this wonderfully safe place.

What are you currently working on?

I'm working on two collections right now. The one I'm almost finished with is titled *1967*. It's really about

my family, an immigrant family in San Francisco in 1967. The other collection is developed from my experiences during a two month visit to Kiyoto, Japan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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