
Writers Resist: At readings nationwide, writers to speak out

By Olivia P. Tallet, Houston Chronicle | January 13, 2017 | Updated: January 20, 2017 4:25pm

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Houston poet laureate Robin Davidson

Writers and poets have organized marathon readings Sunday in more than 90 cities across the United States and around the world. In a movement called Writers Resist, they're organizing to oppose what they see as a deterioration of American values in today's political environment, calling for both action and unity.

In Houston, about 80 writers of diverse backgrounds have joined Writers Resist - so many that local organizers decided to spread the readings over two days. The first is Sunday evening; the second is on Friday, Inauguration Day. Both are free and open to the public.

Lupe Méndez, one of the local Writers Resist organizers, says the events are about "sharing a commitment to the spirit of compassion, equality, free speech and the fundamental ideals of democracy" at a time when people are anxious about the country's future.

A national network of like-minded writers rapidly coalesced after poet Erin Belieu posted a call to action on her Facebook page in November, just days after the election.

The response was overwhelming, said Belieu, co-founder and director of the organization VIDA: Women in the Literary Arts. Belieu lives in Florida, but the event went national almost immediately. The writers' organization PEN America offered to sponsor a reading in New York. Events in other cities followed, including Boston, Los Angeles, Austin and Seattle. The movement has spread to international cities as well, including London, Zurich and Hong Kong.

"Apparently, many people were feeling the same way that I was feeling; we just don't recognize our country with the outcome of this election," Belieu said.

"This election has brought incredibly ugly things," she said. She recalled seeing her 15-year-old son, who has a physical disability, watch Donald Trump mocking disabled journalist Serge Kovaleski on TV.

"I will never forget that moment, and I imagined for Mexican families, for Muslim families, for women, how this campaign season has been so personally assaulting for

MORE INFORMATION

Writers Resist: 'We, Too, Sing America'

When: 5-8 p.m. Sunday

Where: Holocaust Museum of Houston, 5504 Caroline

Writers Resist: 'Let Us Gather'

When: 7-9 p.m. Friday

Where: St. Paul's United Methodist Church, 5501 Main

More information: tinteroprojects.wordpress.com, writersresist.org or call the hosting venues.

us."

Belieu decided she and her fellow writers needed to speak up. "Our country was built on truth with brilliant words and writings, so I felt it was time for us to be activated and try to lead toward ideas of equality, empathy, social justice."

Houston, of course, has a history of activist writers and artists using their words and craft to impact social causes. The writers' organization Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say, for instance, has led two high-profile campaigns in recent years. In 2012, it protested the banning of several books by Latino writers in Tucson, Ariz., schools by forming a "Librotraficante Caravan" to "smuggle" banned books back into the state. Last year, the group encouraged the Texas State Board of Education to reject an error-ridden Mexican-American studies textbook that contained material many considered racist.

Nuestra Palabra helped organize Houston's Writers Resist readings, along with the Balcony Poets, the Houston VIP poetry-slam team, Inprint, Write About Now, WriteSpace, the University of Houston, the University of Houston-Downtown, All Real Radio, the publisher Calypso Editions, the Iconoclast writers' group Tintero Projects and others.

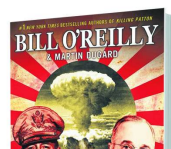
At both events, writers of all colors and ethnicities will read their own poems or excerpts from the work of other writers and inspiring figures from American history.

Sunday's event is called "We, Too, Sing America" - inspired by the Langston Hughes poem "I, Too," which was later reframed by Asian-American Deepa Iyer in her book "We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh Immigrants Shape Our Multiracial Future."

BOOKS



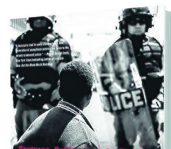
Houston gets a new comics and fantasy store



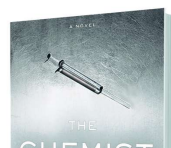
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'Twilight' author's new novel a zippy emotional ride

Friday's event is "Let Us Gather," a theme inspired by the poem "Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way" from U.S. poet laureate Juan Felipe Herrera. The poem is about "the harvesting of an understanding that we are all immigrants in America, regardless of our culture or countries of origin," Méndez said. "That we are all here to harvest our country together."

Writers Resist is based on the belief that writers can impact society in ways that exceed aesthetic pleasures, organizers say.

"Literature and all forms of art have always had an involvement with strong social commentary, and it has an impact on people's emotions and beliefs," said Lorenzo Cano, the associate director of the University of Houston's Center for Mexican American Studies.

The ultimate goal is to motivate Houstonians and all Americans, said writer Tony Díaz, the founder of Nuestra Palabra.

"We want to inspire people," he said. "So maybe we can spread the idea, for example, that the next time people see an injustice, see somebody being bullied, discriminated (against) or abused somewhere, they would go and stand next (to the victim), say 'I am with you,' and start reciting a freedom poem."

What Houston writers plan to read at Writers Resist:

Robin Davidson, Houston's poet laureate, will read a fragment from **Muriel Rukeyser's** "The Life of Poetry":

The tendency of art ... of poetic meaning is toward the most human. It is a further humanity we are trying to achieve. ... How can a group of many people, bound in a balance of statehood, with its fundamental hope a tendency toward democracy, realize its full humanity?... If we lived in full response to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves ... we would be more human. ... Outrage and possibility are in all the poems we know ... writing is another way of giving — a courtesy, and a form of love.

Melissa Studdard, author and host of **VIDA Voices & Views** video program, is reading the poem "Bell," which she wrote specifically for Writers Resist:

*Yet I sing, dragging my liberty behind
me, making an arm carriage for it with
my friends — we carry it into museums
and parks, carry it over iced bridges.*

Gerald Cedillo will read his own writing for the event:

Resistance is the writer's or artist's primary job. Resisting memory, resisting time, resisting all the ugliness or cynicism or disorder that is part of our day to day world. Resistance, in other words, is exactly what we should be doing. How we shape our narrative, where we protest, and to who? These are the questions artists must ponder the coming months, not some of us, all of us.

Rich Levy, executive director of **Inprint**, will read a fragment from the poem "Ode to the Republic" by **Tony Hoagland**:

America, you big scary baby, didn't you know when you pounded your chest like that in public it just embarrassed us?

Deniz López, poet and **All Real Radio** director of operations, will read from her own poems:

it took much meditation
to get past my frustration
to understand the vibration
to join the mexica nation
conscious rhymes on every station
could cause a manifestation

get brown to a genetic elevation
match the Nahuatl translation
pilgrims get the deportation
striped of the taken from their exploration
humans stop suffering exploitation
in every
poor
population

Chris Wise, writer and performer, will read from the poem "Tommy" by **Rudyard Kipling**. He said it's "For the vets who've heard it all before, yet find themselves left at the curb.":

*For it's Tommy this, 'an Tommy that, 'an "Chuck him out, the brute!"
But it's "Saviour of 'is country" when the guns begin to shoot*

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