

## Poets in the Classroom: What We Do When We Teach Writing

**Laurie Ann Guerrero**, with Sabrina San Miguel and Cecilia Amanda Macias  
Texas A&M University-San Antonio, on land of the Coahuiltecan.<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, Texas A&M University–San Antonio celebrated its ten-year anniversary. Situated in the Southside of the city, surrounded by the beloved nopales and mesquite, our dear university holds true to the goal of reaching upward and outward, committed to the students and the community it serves.

I am in my fourth year as a Writer-in-Residence on this campus, which was built on the land where my family has lived for generations. To be from this specific part of Texas (having learned in public schools which men should be celebrated for our independence from Mexico or for our tenacity to be become our own Republic and how this city and those who governed it played such an important role to form our identity as proud Texans) requires a much more open mind and more inclusive way of thinking in order to best understand the steadfastness and audaciousness we as a people in this area have maintained for generations.

My ancestors toiled in these fields, among the same nopales and mesquite, raised their babies here, buried their loved ones here. I am raising my babies here. My grandparents are buried here—my grandparents who picked cotton, who didn't have access to education, who endured racism and classism and sexism that wasn't just outwardly brought upon them, but was internalized, adding to the complex identities and histories into which we were born.

And now I, too, work on this land, in a capacity my grandparents could only have dreamed of. I am a writer, a documentarian—from a family of laborers. Writing and teaching on this campus has unraveled in me a kind of understanding I could not have had otherwise.

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**BETWEEN THE SOIL AND THE SUN**

by Laurie Ann Guerrero

*in honor of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Texas A&M University-San Antonio  
for Cecilia Amanda Macias & Sabrina San Miguel*

...you cannot afford to think of being here to *receive* your education;  
you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to *claim* one...  
The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon...  
it can literally mean the difference between life and death.

—Adrienne Rich, “Claiming an Education,” (p. 231)

This is what I want to tell you:  
This is yours—the air and all who breathe it.  
We belong to each other, you see.

You need not carry the stones in your heart  
any farther. Here, there is no paper, no  
number, no fight you need to produce

so that someone else will make space  
for you. It’s the history in your hands  
that build, brick by brick, the rooms

into which you walk. We will mark the days  
as they come: a job lost, another child  
gone, lines—to vote, to eat, to pay our debts—

conferring, as it were, temperance noted  
in books our people could not read. Look here,  
this is what I want to say: you are not here

to receive your education, but to build upon  
the lessons distilled through generations,  
to give your own inherent knowing

in return—in the name of something far greater.  
In the spirit of yours and mine whose bodies  
hold up the soles of our feet and whose knowing

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tames the quivers in our throats. Here is the lot,  
cleared, and in its place, the documented  
evolution of our work on this land: our breath

in contracts with the earth and with each other.  
You are the bloom that holds the root, making  
magic between the soil and the sun.

My students bring with them their own rich histories; more than 80% are from this area, according to my conversation with our university president, Dr. Cynthia Teniente-Matson. Also, of the students we serve, Latinx make up 71%, first-generation students make up 70%, and women make up 60%. These facts are the proof that we are reaping the benefits of the struggles of those who bore sweat in our name. And that is sacred. And that is what I get to see and take pride in as part of this institution—the bloodlines that exist here, the struggle, the empowerment. To know this land, to honor it, is to represent it well—which is to say, we are a family.

This is the basis for which I run my classroom. As a teaching poet, my job is not just to get students to write, and write well, but to help students uncover what needs to be written—their own histories and the history they are making. This work requires that the classroom become a safe space to explore, to risk, to ask questions, and most importantly, it requires that all who enter do so with a willingness to be vulnerable. In this lies strength—and when students are forthcoming with their fears, their goals, their histories, they become empowered, they become empathetic, and the steadfastness we inherited from our people becomes that with which we progress. By adding to the already documented accounts, by offering a previously omitted part of the story, we recover what was historically taken from us: our voice. And, as important, we recover a self-awareness wholly developed and nourished by the respecting and honoring of who and where we are from.

In the last few years, I spent a great deal of time with 2 specific graduate students, writers: Sabrina San Miguel and Cecilia Amanda Macias. I worked with them closely throughout four consecutive semesters on campus. I chose to share their work with you because of their persevering commitment to their education, to their art, and to their brave and difficult emotional / physical / spiritual work.

Sabrina & Cecilia both graduated in May of 2019 with an MA in English. They are co-founders of, *Feliz*, a zine for women of color “who define their own damn happiness.” The two are a unique pair who had very different paths that got them to same university at the same time— each challenging and supporting the other, each speaking up on the other’s behalf, each daring the other to be louder, braver, and each

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the loudest to applaud in the other's audience. I was just lucky enough to witness this gift of young, strong, brilliant women who happened to take some classes with me...who happened to let me bear witness to this generation of empowered women.

A single mother of three small children, a dedicated writer, native to the Eastside of San Antonio, Sabrina San Miguel explores the intersections of identities in her work. Her poetry works to scratch away at the layered history of women in her family while reconciling also what she intentionally or unintentionally gives to her own children. A first-generation college graduate, Sabrina sustains her commitment to be bold, to dare to break tradition, and all in the name of making a space for her children and community to do the same. Her poetry is gritty, unapologetically honest and reveals unspoken intimacies in the struggle for justice.

**DRIVING MY CHILDREN TO SCHOOL  
THE MORNING AFTER ANOTHER MASS SHOOTING**

by Sabrina San Miguel

NPR reports that video footage surfaced of the mass shooting in Sutherland Springs.

*I am driving. Rent is late. I cannot think over the kids' chatter.*

Said the monster both smoke and metal were systematic in his destruction.

*The phone won't get shut off until the 25th.  
My children are always loud. Today they are curious.*

Aisle after aisle. Pew by pew. Seven minutes in heaven. Trespassing against many.

*My son is counting streetlights now. Asking me to reconsider my dinosaur preference. I stand my ground. Velociraptor, kid and I ain't budging. Oh god, how will I pay for Christmas next month?*

White woman on radio calls in to ask why no one fought back.

*I am caught off guard. Stop thinking about bills. I scoff at her question— as if it is normal to bring a weapon to praise and worship on Sundays.*

Texas Department of Public Safety released the list of the dead. Grouped the families together so that they remained safe, at least on paper.

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*My children are quiet now. I tell my daughter to stop googling his name.  
Not to give him power in death. She says she's happy we don't believe in  
god. I wish we didn't believe in theaters or schools either.*

Twenty-Six in total. Children and the elderly. Mostly women.

*I read some of their ages— One. Five. Ten. Children the same age as my own. Not driving in a car  
this morning with their mothers. And dinosaurs. I cannot imagine the quiet there. How death  
sounds the morning after. Do gunshots echo in the ear canal of those that lived?*

A man with a country accent calls in. Says this is how the world is nowadays and we should better prepare next time.

*My son tells me he would protect me from a T-Rex if it ever came to Texas. Ninjas too. I push the  
thought of his tiny brown body protecting me from anything out of my mind. Look at him through  
the rearview mirror. Scan his almond eyes. Brilliant baby teeth. None missing just yet. Take note  
of the gray hoodie. In case I have to identify his body. A quick prayer that I never will.*

The program cuts away briefly to something unrelated about Hollywood before we pull up to the school.

*I scan my daughter. Tortoise shell glasses. Unicorn hoodie. Her nails are  
painted purple and chipping. Please God let them live— and help me with rent.*

Cecilia Amanda Macias is also a dedicated writer, native to the Southside of San Antonio and the surrounding area. Both academic and creative, Cecilia dares to ask the questions in her work that too many shy away from. She is a brilliant debater, deliberate in the expression of her sharp ideas and opinions, and often she speaks the truths others cannot. A dancer, performer, and visual artist as well, Cecilia's poetry holds a space for her to breathe, to lay down her arms, and to reflect on those whose voices were not as strong as her own. Her work makes no apologies—it is logical and hard-hitting and demands that you catch up.

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## LA PALOMA

by Cecilia Amanda Macias

The doves that remained at home, never exposed to loss,  
innocent and secure, cannot know tenderness...

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Dove that Ventured Outside”

You died as swiftly as you hit the glass.

Paper towel scrape—  
unresisting plumes  
lift off concrete.

Peering electric blue,  
lifeless  
eye. Slit throat, guts  
on white-gray feathers.

Parking lot processional—  
I commit you to the black  
garbage. Peace.

I experience a joy like no other when I watched my students receive their master’s degrees and start their own careers. But it’s the conversations, the sharing, the risks we took in the classroom that led to the long hours dedicated to the solitary act of writing—the quiet space where we (myself included) distilled our individual goals, our collective plights. The quiet space where we go to dare ourselves to be bolder, be stronger, be true.

While there are a great many benefits to reading and engaging with poetry (including the reconciling of our own intimate truths and growing our capacity to think wider and more inclusively), reading poetry will not change our history. But writing poetry will most certainly change the course of it.

This is what we are doing.

## Endnotes

1. Land acknowledgement – The native people. (2020). Retrieved April 30, 2020, from <https://www.nps.gov/saan/learn/historyculture/history3nativepeople.htm>

## References

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## About the Poets

Laurie Ann Guerrero is the author of *Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying* (University of Notre Dame Press 2013) and *A Crown for Gumecindo* (Aztlán Libre Press 2015). Her latest collection, *I Have Eaten the Rattlesnake: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Texas Christian University Press. She has held consecutive positions as Poet Laureate of the city of San Antonio (2014-2016) and the State of Texas (2016-2017). Guerrero holds a B.A. in English Language & Literature from Smith College, an MFA in poetry from Drew University, and is the Writer-in-Residence at Texas A&M University-San Antonio.

Sabrina San Miguel was born and raised on the Eastside of San Antonio. A founding member of Felize Zine, San Miguel is the mother of three and the first in her family to receive a college education. San Miguel received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and in Women’s Studies and her master’s degree in English at Texas A&M-San Antonio. She is currently at work on her first collection of poetry, *My Mother was a Woodworker*.

Cecilia Amanda Macias is a founding member of Felize Zine and creates scholarship researching and producing Chicana literature and performance. Her poetry investigates Chicana identity, ancestral legacy, and the role of the poet-scholar. Macias was born into the Tejana diaspora in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is a proud resident of San Antonio’s Southside and currently works supporting adult education. She received her Bachelor of Arts and her master’s degree in English at Texas A&M University-San Antonio.