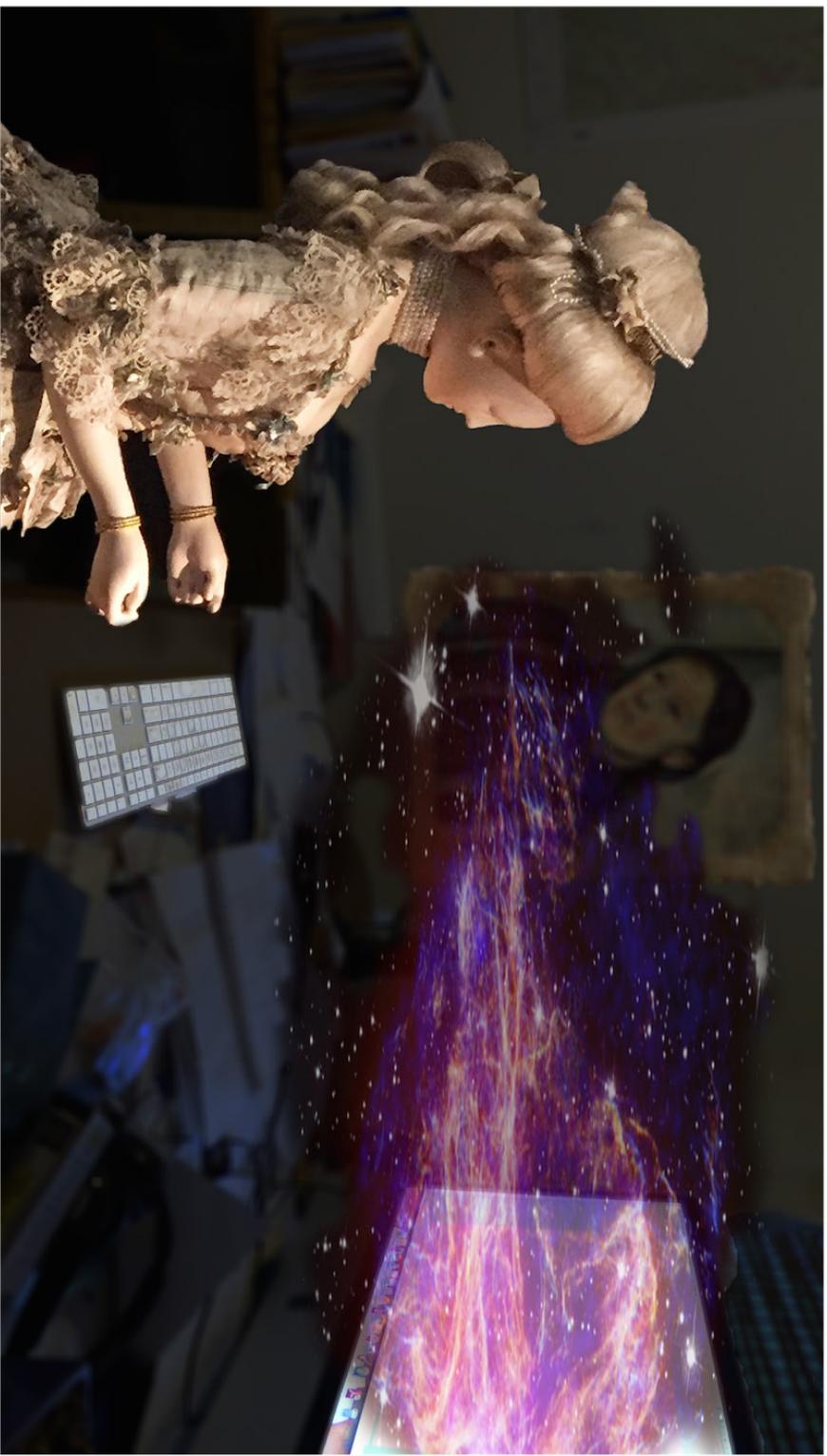


# AUTOMATA



# Welcome and thanks for picking up a copy of our first issue!

Automata is inspired by the current social climate, examining it through poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and the arts. We're excited to present this first issue, featuring Sacramento Poet Laureate Indigo Moor, Seattle Black Panther Party co-founder Elmer Dixon, and acclaimed short story author and journalist Caille Millner.

The Open Book Press is the publishing division of The Open Book used book store and event center, at 671 Maltman Drive in Grass Valley, California.

Our title and image are meant to pay homage to the analog brilliance of 18<sup>th</sup> century automata, as well as to that phase of the artistic process that has us following the script of our inspiration. The mechanical merges with the imaginative, the incendiary, and the emotional.

*In childhood we are said to be attracted by the color and movement of these little creatures, in adolescence by the intricate clockwork mechanisms that give them the illusion of life, in adulthood by the truth and beauty of the dramas they enact, and in old age by the timeless perfection of an art that lifts us above the cares of mortality and gives meaning to our lives.*

-The fictional narrator of Steven Millhauser's "The New Automaton Theater"

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## Q & A: Indigo Moor, Poet

*Congratulations on being Sacramento's new Poet Laureate! Can you start by telling us a bit about who you are, your background, and how you first became interested in poetry and the arts?*

Who I am...that is difficult. As the saying goes, we are all more than the sum of our parts. To that end, my background will only be so much help.

I was born in Charlotte, NC, in 1964. From that time until now, I have worked in a cardboard boxing factory, a steel refinery, a warehouse or two. I spent 10 years in the Navy, first as a nuclear reactor technician, then as an aviation electrician. I received two letters of commendation as well as a Kuwaiti Liberation medal during Desert Storm. I worked for 21 years at Intel in various positions, but mostly as a Physical Design Engineer on computer chips. I received my Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 2012.

I am a nerd. A geek. A jazz musician. A poet, a scriptwriter. As prone to quote Bugs Bunny as Gandhi. I am a fairly silly person, but you wouldn't know it from my poetry. My short stories are often funny.

I'm generally happy, but not so much when I have not written for awhile. At those times, I can be erratic and a bit fractured in my thinking. It is fair to say that my imagination fills up rapidly and, unless I get it out, I am like a pressure cooker with a stuck relief valve. I'm not crazy about me if I am not writing and I imagine only my closest friends can tolerate me at those times.

I've been creative all my life in one way or another. I have always thought in terms of creation, not just as a consumer. I was well into my teens before I realized that not everyone thought that way.



I don't know if there was a particular instance that led me to writing. I wrote. It was what I did. It is who I am.

*What is your creative process like?*

As with most artists, my process changes from year to year, project to project. My latest book, *In the Room of Thirsts and Hungers*, was a very exacting manuscript. Each poem was historically and/or theatrically based, four quatrains and an ending couplet. The work was meticulous and migraine inducing. Other poems have dictated a more organic approach, the words and phrases enacting more space and less constriction on the page. Some poems arrive after research, many from a single image or thought, flowing naturally on the page.

*Throughout your poetry, we've noticed themes around family, and your roots in the South. How does the notion of "home" inform your work?*

For me it means a place I am always trying to write myself toward. There is a Portuguese word, *saudade*, meaning a deep emotional state of nostalgic or profound melancholic longing for an absent something or someone that one loves. Whether internal or external, that is my understanding of the word home.

*How did your epistolary poems between Othello and Paul Robeson come about?*

*In the Room of Thirsts & Hungers*, my third book, is due out in July of 2017. The epistolary relationship is not a true one. Othello speaks into a mirror about his trials and tribulations. Paul Robeson, off stage from his role as Othello, speaks to himself, as Othello.

*What is the connection between the painter Aaron Douglas, the Harlem Renaissance, and your work?*

You are referring to the six poems that comprise the second chapter of *Through the Stonecutter's Window*. I am a huge fan of ekphrastic poetry (written about art). I found a complete nar-

rative in Douglas's "Aspects of Negro Life #62." I originally thought it would be one poem.

*As expressed throughout your collection Tap Root, does music continue to have an impact on your poetry?*

Yes, it could be said I have spent a great deal of time relating poetry to music, as well as art to music and poetry. I see no great difference between expression in art.

*When did you become interested in theatre? Can you tell us about the process of writing Live! at the Excelsior (a finalist for the Images Theatre Playwright Award)?*

All forms of expression interest me. Probably always have. I wrote the bulk of *Excelsior* while attending the Stonecoast MFA program. My mentor, Mike Kimball, was instrumental in my growth as a scriptwriter. I spent time working with local playwrights, actors, and directors, honing my skills. *Excelsior* was the first product of that time.

*As we enter the sixth month of the Trump era, can you tell us a bit about your own reactions to the new President's policies and actions?*

As an African-American, I am used to this level of duplicity, lies, demonization, and condescension. All of it reaching a nationwide level is troubling. As Poet Laureate, I look forward to healing divisions, raising consciousness, and promoting the arts as an everyday part of human existence, not just something a select few do on the weekends.

*Would you like to share a poem with us?*

## **Puertas Abiertas**

Oil on canvas by Marco Rosales

Understanding  
the hubris inherent  
in Dorian Gray's  
psyche, you paint

flesh with flesh,  
cast heart pulp down  
as if it were *Toro Bravo*.

Slowly pump  
varying shades,  
red across the four  
chambers of canvas.

Always

mindful of the shaman's  
warning: *Never*

*sell this original.*

In all its frangibility  
enfolding, brittle  
synthesis  
of blood and fervor  
we are reminded:

this is your chest split-  
ripe, the heart  
still beating  
like a blacksmith's forge.

Royal chestnut  
bleeds into dark  
Venetian  
top to bottom  
as your strokes

contract and relax  
diastole  
& systole, piston  
work of your passion.

Through your left

and right atriums,  
thick crimson ripples,  
raised in relief,  
hold court with  
an orange Cordoban hat,  
throbbing like  
an autumn sun.

Below, calming fervor  
is woven into ventricles:  
flamenco boots  
in blurred motion.

A noose-thin tie  
laid flat, restrains  
a wan  
river cascading.

And all the while  
the canvas tinged  
with undulating waves

as if  
(in afterthought) you  
offer up your trackwork  
of nerves in sacrifice,  
pulsing  
with cryptic lightning.

## Q&A: Elmer Dixon, Former Black Panther

*(A 2015 phone interview that we updated in consultation with Dixon in June, 2017. -Eds.)*

**SELLS:** Can you start by telling me a bit about yourself, your background, and how you first became interested in social activism?



**DIXON:** I grew up in a very diverse neighborhood in Seattle, [and] had a number of friends, but my two best friends were white, and I hung out with them most of the time. [When] I got to high school, I didn't have much of a political ideology. I didn't realize the impact of watching the demonstrators during the Civil Rights movement being beaten by cops and hosed by firefighters, and [seeing] the bombing of the 16th street Baptist Church, but my parents wanted to make sure we<sup>1</sup> saw those things...I remember marching with Dr. King when he came to town in either 1961 or '62, when I was 11 or 12 years old. But it wasn't until Stokely Carmichael came to town in 1967, [and] we went to hear him speak, that I began to develop some consciousness around being black, and what the struggle meant, and [to be] awakened [about] the Black is Beautiful movement, and [about] the pride of being who you are. That led to my becoming a member of the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] – in fact I was the co-chair of the Seattle chapter. From there, I organized a boycott at my high school in order for us to get a recognized black Student Union [BSU]. We became the first recognized BSU on the West Coast.

Several months later, we were asked to support a group of Franklin High School students, a rival school of ours...They were a very diverse student body, and regardless of the sports rivalry, we were friends and they asked us over there to help [their BSU]. My brother was asked [too], as a student at UW [the University of Washington] at the time. We also asked several

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1 Elmer and his older brother Aaron.

other well known figures, [such as] Larry Gasset, the President of the BSU at UW. We went there, took over the principal's office and occupied until our demands were met the next morning.

A week or so later, I was arrested out of my geometry class. That same day, Malcolm X was assassinated, and it appeared as though they were getting us off the street. They rounded up about eight of us, getting us off the street before the news broke. A week later, we were traveling to San Francisco to attend the West Coast BSU conference where we met Bobby Seale and decided we were going to form a chapter of the Black Panther Party [BPP], and did so. Two weeks later Bobby Seale came up, and that was the first chapter formed outside of the State of California, in 1968.

That's my path to activism, and currently I'm the President of Executive Diversity Services [EDS] [in Seattle], a management consulting firm that's been in business 28 years. We do diversity and inclusion consulting and training, and it actually — in my eyes and heart — is a continuation of the work that we did as members of the Black Panther Party.

SELLS: What was the initial response to the Seattle Chapter — the city's reaction as well as the members'?

DIXON: It was at a time when the Black Panther Party itself was really exploding onto the scene, [having] been localized in California in its early years. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, alongside a few other Panthers, [had] started the organization in 1966...One of the events that was pushing this forward was Huey: ...on trial and [then] in jail for the shooting of a police officer in 1967 (killing one officer and wounding another). He was wounded as well and acquitted later of the charges, but [from] jail launched the Free Huey movement. It began to explode in the Bay Area and around California, and we just happened to be there when little Bobby Hutton was murdered about two days before Martin Luther King. When we were there that week, we attended his funeral, which prompted all of us to become Panthers.

When we became the first chapter outside of California,

the party grew like wildfire across the country. Bobby stopped in Seattle, ...grabbed my brother Aaron, [and] traveled across the country, establishing chapters. Like these other cities, we had hundreds of people join the party overnight. Most of them wouldn't last long, but it was a fervor that launched across the black community here and across the county. It positioned us to eventually have chapters in most major cities...in almost every state, ...eventually reaching as far as Australia and across Europe. We became an international sensation very quickly. The response was overwhelmingly positive in terms of people wanting to...join the Party at the time, because the movement had moved to a stage when some people were willing to push back and fight back, so we were immensely popular in that way.

The establishment here and across the country was scared to death of us, because suddenly there were young black people armed and talking about revolution and the system, and the city was probably terrified.

But those were the times back then.

SELLS: What was your experience specifically within the Seattle landscape, where at the time non-whites were restricted from owning land, and places like the Coon Chicken Inn were still a city staple? How did these and other forms of segregation affect the chapter?

DIXON: We...grew up in a neighborhood next door to the redline area; it was two blocks from our house. We didn't know it at the time, but my two best friends who were white lived on the other side of the redline, and their houses were of course bigger and more beautiful, and one of them had a maid. But growing up we didn't know why and we didn't notice all of the nuances, just that the houses seemed to be nicer.

As young Panthers, ...the real estate companies that were positioned right there on the same street where our offices were, ended up renting us our initial office. [Another] one at the other end [of the street] refused any agreement to end redlining, and her company was burned to the ground within weeks. She was notoriously known as a racist, and members of the Party, without any orders from anyone of course, burned her building

down.

The housing segregation in Seattle did not officially end until 1975, when the housing ordinance was passed. [Before that,] there [had been] language about particular neighborhoods so that realtors were not supposed to offer loans or show homes or sell homes to members of the “Negroid race” or the Asian race, although they used a derogatory term. They mentioned Mexican-Americans as well.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of how it affected our movement: the Party’s focus was not about integration *per se*, but if we noticed something that violated human rights, we were going to stand up against it and demand changes. But we wanted to exercise the right to control the destiny of our own black community. We wanted decent housing in our own neighborhoods, we wanted schools that taught the true nature of our identity, we wanted health care, we wanted food and bread and the right to survive and live as a people. These were reflected in the 10-point program of the Party. We weren’t about changing housing laws, we were about demanding revolution and demanding justice and we were going to take it—we weren’t going to ask for it. While we were aware of redlining and discriminatory laws, that wasn’t our agenda. We wanted to develop our own schools and teach our own kids and make sure that they had decent education. We would speak out about how segregation affected black people. We wanted the opportunity and the ability to control our own destiny.

SELLS: What do you think were the most widely held

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2 “...on April 19, 1968, three weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., an open housing ordinance was passed unanimously by the City Council, with an emergency clause to make it effective immediately. It was signed by the Mayor the same day... The open housing legislation was broadened in 1975 to make it illegal to discriminate based on sex, marital status, sexual orientation and political ideology...” From “The Seattle Open Housing Campaign, 1959-1968” at [seattle.gov/cityarchives/exhibits-and-education/digital-document-libraries/the-seattle-open-housing-campaign](http://seattle.gov/cityarchives/exhibits-and-education/digital-document-libraries/the-seattle-open-housing-campaign)

misconceptions about the Black Panther Party?

DIXON: I think number one was that we were violent. Number two was that we were separatists or racists.

We formed in response to the violence that had been perpetuated against black and other oppressed people. We believed that it was violent to deny kids their identity, as in the example of what the federal government did to the Native American babies and kids when they stole them from reservations and tried to erase their identity – which they [also] did to blacks during slavery. We thought it was violent to deny people healthcare; we thought it was violent to deny people food and adequate shelter. We were responding to the violence that was being perpetuated against black and other oppressed people. So that's one of the first misconceptions. We didn't arm ourselves with guns to go shoot people. We armed ourselves to defend ourselves against the racist attacks that were being perpetuated in our community.

The other misconception is that we were separatists or racists, which wasn't true at all. At a lecture I gave a few years ago, I was met by two students...outside of the classroom. One of them, a young black student, asked me "... What was the Black Panther Party? Was that like the black KKK?" I was stunned. But I also realized that that was a deliberate mis-perception of the BPP. The fact is that we had coalitions in the white communities, the Brown, Red, and Yellow communities. One of the groups that worked with us was the Young Patriots, [from] the Appalachian South; the Young Lords, a Puerto-Rican group [from] New York; and AIM, the American Indian Movement. All of these were active coalitions [with] the BPP. We had a multicultural platform back in the 1960s, and while people [who] organized back then and were active back then know that, the broad public don't and didn't know it because the press deliberately tried to paint us as these wild, crazy, violent, separatist and racist individuals.

Any people with any common sense, and those who read our histories, know that this isn't the case, but a lot of that mis-perception continues to be pervasive.

# Seattle Panther Takes Fifth—17 Times



ELMER DIXON, SEATTLE BLACK PANTHER, TALKED WITH ATTORNEY DAVID REIN  
But congressional committee got no answers from Dixon to their questions

WASHINGTON — (AP) — A Seattle Black Panther cited the Fifth Amendment 17 times yesterday in refusing to answer questions before the House Internal Security Committee.

Elmer James Dixon III, 19, stated his name and gave his address as 173-2065 Ave., Seattle. The address had been identified by Seattle police and committee investigators as the current headquarters of the Black Panther Party in the city.

Accompanied by Washington attorney David Rein, Dixon began claiming his constitutional right against self-incrimination with the question:

"Are you employed?"

"I refuse to answer. I take the Fifth Amendment," Dixon responded.

Dixon gave the same response to questions whether he is a member of the Black Panther drill and firearms practice, believes in the violent overthrow of the government, or knows the names of the address "off the top of his head."

Dixon had been identified by previous witnesses in the committee's inquiry into Black Panther activities in Seattle as second in command of the chapter and the brother of Aaron Dixon, its captain.

Committee investigator Richard Shaw testified the Panthers once rented a headquarters at 127½ 34th Ave., Seattle, from Benjamin Brill.

Shaw and Brill refused to rent to the Panthers until after the premises were firebombed.

Shaw said Brill told him he set the rent at \$63 a month, but reduced it to \$51 under threat; that he received only three months rent in the 19 months the Panthers occupied the building and that he "chose not to prosecute for fear of his own safety."

Shaw said several Panthers, including Aaron and Elmer Dixon, have received more than \$1,000 each in national defense student loans and educational opportunity grants, but "I don't think they're students."

The committee is investigating the activities of Seattle Black Panthers as part of a nationwide probe of the Panthers.

SELLS: Why do you think that that history is often left out of modern school curriculum?

DIXON: Because we were effective organizers. They don't want the true story; they don't want the true story of our successes to be told. I was in France in 2010 doing a keynote at a conference and I met a couple of people from Amsterdam who wanted me to come and speak in the Netherlands, which I did, but they said kids there learn about the BPP in school... Here I was ten thousand miles away from home and school kids are being taught about the relevance of the work that we did, but at home, we're almost erased from the history books. That's because they don't want young kids to know the power of [the] political organizing that we...accomplished, how we mattered and made a difference. They don't want kids to learn that; they would rather have them be complacent, be nonpolitical, obedient, and continue to fight and die for this country. But [kids] are not dying for this country, they're dying to maintain the military industrial complex. Young people are [treated like] cattle, and that's why we don't tell them the truth about the BPP.

SELLS: Why did the Seattle Chapter disband?

DIXON: That's a longer story than we probably have time for, but I'll tell you in a nutshell. The FBI launched the most vociferous and violent campaign...to destroy the BPP in

history. In 1968 J. Edgar Hoover called the BPP the number one threat to the internal security of the United States. That would be like calling us Al Qaeda today. They launched a campaign in an infamous memo...: J. Edgar Hoover ordered his field agents to disrupt, destroy, discredit the activities of "Black Hate Groups" – namely the BPP – and prevent the rise of a "Black Messiah." They infiltrated our organizations. They murdered us in our sleep – Fred Hampton in Chicago – I could run down a whole list of murdered former Panthers. Fred Hampton's bodyguard was an informant; the police set up his murder. One of my bodyguards was a police agent who facilitated my going to prison. My brother almost blew off his head because someone planted buckshot in his shotgun shells. They were murdering us, attacking us, infiltrating us, causing fighting.

Eventually that took a toll on the Party. In 1976, we broke away from Central Headquarters. We continued to run the programs of the BPP and spun off into a non-profit organization. In fact, I organized a Board of Directors and headed in the direction of securing a non-profit status and 501c(3) and continued to run the programs for another six years. The breakfast program is still alive...We embarrassed the federal government in feeding kids, because we ran successful breakfast programs. The free medical clinic that we started in Seattle is still running today, first established in 1969.

SELLS: What do you think of the group that operates under the name "the New Black Panther Party"?

DIXON: They have nothing to do with us and need to go get their own name. They are defrauding our image and our memory. They're not about anything; they don't have a program or an agenda. They're trying to organize [based] on the name of our organization and act as if they have some affiliation. There's some suggestion that they were organized by the CIA and FBI to further discredit the Black Panther Party – but they just need to go away.

SELLS: What do you think about the state of current social activism? Do you think there's room for a Black Panther Party chapter to spring up again in Seattle?

DIXON: I think that young people need to find something new and something different. I was asked to introduce a new film called [*The Black Panthers:*] *Vanguard of the Revolution*. I did and fielded questions... There were members of the so-called new BPP at that event and I told them the story about how the BPP formed. There was [also] an organization in Alabama called the Beacons for Defense, who were armed black men, and as their symbol, they had the black panther.

But we, originally, didn't go out and call ourselves "Beacons for Defense." We [originally] found our own name and organized. I told them that if you want to organize, find your own identity. You don't need to steal someone else's identity; that's identity theft. I think that young people today – the issues are very similar – ...more than ever people today can see and realize that the perpetuation of this system of deprivation is almost colorblind. That's not to say that blacks and Latinos don't get the worst of it, because we do. But when I see elderly white people being kicked out of their apartments because a real estate developer wants to come in and turn them into luxury condos or raise the rent 300%, it's clear that these kinds of social issues are affecting people across the spectrum, not only people of color. Young people need to organize around that; they need to find their own ground and their own footing and they certainly should take examples of efforts of organizations like the BPP but they do need their own identity and a new front, a new apparatus. But that doesn't mean that they can't learn from our experiences – they should and they need to.

SELLS: What do you think about the militant image that is still perpetuated about black men in particular? What do you think about being armed as a person of color when it is still so dangerous?

DIXON: I think there has been a socially constructed... demonization of black men in particular since we came here as slaves. That social construct has persisted to the point where you have cops who can justify murdering an unarmed innocent – in most cases [a] black or Latino man – because they can say they fear for their lives. That fear is based in social stereo-

typing and [the] demonization that has occurred since blacks first arrived from Africa in chains. It's a persistent phenomenon that continues to exist and [be] continually perpetuated. It needs to be challenged.

When you look at why the BPP armed itself in the late 60s and you look at what was going on across the country, you look at the bombing at the churches, the beating, the lynchings that were strong images, it's [a] wonder that black people didn't arm themselves before and defend their communities. The first name the BPP took on was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. We were highlighting that...the Constitution of the United States gives the right to own and bear arms and to defend oneself against attack, and to also dismantle the Declaration of Independence, which gives the right of the people to dismantle a government that is no longer a government of and by and for the people. All of the things that we organized and became part of...were responses to 1) the horrific conditions that black people were forced to live in and 2) ...the Declaration of Independence.

Today, however, you talk about arming yourself, there's so much backlash against gang violence and gun violence, the violence on the street, that people automatically assume that if you're going to arm yourself, you're doing it as an offensive tactic rather than as defensive. I don't know how they can hold that argument up when you look at what happened in Paris and Kenya and Lebanon with ISIS, people are asking "How can we protect ourselves against this kind of attack?" I don't know the answer. It's a different time than when we were Panthers walking around openly with guns talking about self-defense. You have to recognize the times, which doesn't mean people shouldn't be prepared to defend ourselves; but it's a different time and a different dynamic, it's not a time for us to walk around advocating...bearing arms.

SELLS: What do you think about the appropriation of hip-hop culture and the gang image as being stereotypically perpetuated, but also glorified and – especially in white culture – glamorized with no regard to the actual day-to-day lived

experience of minorities?

DIXON: Everything is sensationalized. Hip-hop culture has not always been and is not always about gang violence and the manipulation and the degrading of women. Hip-hop culture has not always been about that, though gangs have taken advantage of it. They're the ones that people latch onto because it's sensationalized. How in the world can that be, you might ask? Well how in the world can Kim Kardashian be a celebrity? What brought her to fame? People might be searching for something that they can scream at? I don't know the answer to why that happens, but it does. People are looking for something, but maybe we're looking in the wrong places.

SELLS: I was looking back at the news outlets of Seattle's past and I found Northwest Enterprise and The Afro-American Journal; I'm wondering if you see a place for a new kind of literary hub for Seattle's African-American community?

DIXON: Absolutely. There needs to be a place; there needs to be a hub. I think the medium does a good job of covering events, but I think there's an opportunity for a different kind of medium here in the Northwest – and there should be.

SELLS: Would you be interested in guest-posting something like that?

DIXON: I would be willing to do a periodic guest post.

SELLS: Looking back at your experiences and involvement with the BPP, would you have done anything differently?

DIXON: I try not to look back and think about what I would have done differently. We did what we did. We made some mistakes, we had some successes, but we were living in the moment...I think it's futile to go back and say "I would have done this differently." Certainly there might be a few things that I would have [done differently], but I don't revisit those things. If you look at how we organized, we were being attacked vociferously from the outside. The attempts to murder us in our sleep and the attacks on our offices were one thing. We could fight that and we could defend ourselves, even though we had infiltrations.

Things that were happening behind the scenes, though –

the CIA [and] the FBI have been dirty for a very long time. People praise them today because they have an image of keeping people safe and keeping democracy safe – and maybe they do – but that doesn't mean that they don't [also use] dirty tactics. When they sent letters back and forth between various entities in the Party claiming to be them, [that] instigated an internal war where people were murdered, some of them my very close friends. The national distribution manager of the BPP newspaper, Sam Napier – ...a very good friend of mine – was burned alive by the New York Panther agents over some dispute that was started by the FBI.

When you look back and wonder what you would have done differently, maybe we would have done certain things, but would that have prevented us from being attacked in the weeds like we were attacked...? Probably not. You have to look at what you've done in your life and move on.

SELLS: Today it seems extremely difficult to separate from every single thing you've ever done when it's posted on social media. I think there's a lot of potential for that to be harnessed for movements, which is it being used as such, but it also has so many pitfalls, for instance in terms of scrutiny.

DIXON: Yes. It does.

SELLS: I have one last question about your work with Diversity Services. What's your vision for multicultural awareness, and how do you see that being increased in today's culture?

DIXON: There's a lot of work [to do]. If I had a vision, it would be that people understood cultures and understood the challenges: ...working together, ...learning how to be effective in communication, ...managing conflict, and understanding the benefits of being inclusive. That's the vision: that organizations and companies become inclusive and value differences.

...I started at EDS in 1988 and became full-time in 1990. I remember when we decided to become a global company. I remember thinking "In twenty years, we'll be out of business, because we'll have trained everybody in the world and everyone will understand one another and we'll be fine." It was a

naive thought, but it was what I thought could be.

In many instances [now] when I go into some of these companies, we're back where we were 20-30 years ago. What's happening on some of these school campuses – today – students walking around in blackface? It's because people's parents have not taught them or educated them, telling them they deserve something special and unique. White privilege and male privilege is pervasive. But I believe there's hope. My vision and my goal is to make as much difference as I can, to get my voice out there and hope it's significant [enough] to inspire someone like you to inspire other young people to go out and demand better...of your peers and make a change; all I can do is shout at the top of my lungs, and to go into companies and work with them and try to make a difference.

## Q&A: Caille Millner, Journalist and Author

**C**ongratulations on being included in The Best American Short Stories 2016! Can you start by telling us a bit about who you are and how you first became interested in writing?

I grew up in San Jose, California, and I live in San Francisco. In addition to writing literary fiction and nonfiction for publications like *Zyzzyyva*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *The Paris Review Daily*, I'm an editorial writer and columnist at the San Francisco Chronicle.



I couldn't tell you a time when I wasn't interested in writing. It was very clear to me from an early age that it was what I needed to be doing.

*Who or what inspires you artistically?*

I read lots of books, like any good writer, but I also spend a lot of time looking at visual art. The ways artists work out conceptual problems in their work is useful when I'm thinking about ways to handle conceptual problems in literature, especially certain conventions we've learned to skip over and take for granted.

Some of my favorite writers are W.G. Sebald, Toni Morrison, Marilynne Robinson, Thomas Mann, Anton Chekhov, Robert Walser, John Berger, Gayl Jones, and Yiyun Li. Some of my favorite artists are Martin Ramirez, Lee Bontecou, Adrian Piper, and Joseph Beuys. The connecting thread between all of these people is that even the simplest of their works contains a hidden cosmic complexity. They make the mysterious plain.

The Golden Road: Notes on my Gentrification *chronicles your*

*young life growing up as an African-American woman in a Latino neighborhood in San Jose. How has that informed your perspective as a journalist, and as a short story writer?*

There were two major reasons I wanted to write a memoir first. One, I could've used a personal story like that when I was growing up. Two, I wanted to avoid writing a bad autobiographical first novel.

That's only partly a joke. I knew I would be writing about a multicultural world, and that I'd have to answer questions about that. American fiction can be pretty Balkanized; writers are expected to write about their own narrow field of race and class and experience. There are some good reasons for this, because in the past many writers haven't been careful to express the full humanity of all people. But it can leave those of us who didn't grow up in a narrow field feeling stranded. I wanted to set the groundwork for the experiences I write into.

*As an acclaimed columnist for The San Francisco Chronicle, can you talk about how the current state of politics has affected your writing?*

Some days I feel terrible and find it difficult to read or to write. But most days I feel a great fire to create something. If we're mindful, the things we create in this time will last longer than the bad politics.

*Your short story "The Politics of the Quotidian" captures the nuances of racial tension in the academic milieu. (It also feels anticipatory of the social anxiety explored in Jordan Peele's successful new thriller Get Out.) What drove you to create this story?*

It came from listening to my girlfriends who work, or worked, in academia. It struck me that these remarkable women, all of whom are better-educated than I am, were coming up against certain forces in their jobs that they didn't even have words to

describe. And of course our job as writers is to create language for these situations. I wasn't thinking about the growing discourse around micro-aggressions, and I certainly didn't anticipate *Get Out*, but I do feel like I was fortunate with the timing.

*We feel encouraged after learning that "Politics..." reached its final form after 18 drafts. Can you tell us a little about that revision process – the story of this story, including what kept you motivated along the way?*

I enjoyed the character, and I enjoyed the challenge of finding the right tonal balance for the story. It needed some comedy, it needed some surrealism, it needed some very sad realism – it was fun to tweak things until I got it right. You do need to enjoy solving problems in order to be a writer.

*Can you talk about what it's like to wear three different writing hats (journalism, short fiction, and memoir)? What are some of the key ways that the forms of writing overlap for you, and what are some of the key differences?*

Journalism has been a great job – it's kept me out of the academy, for one thing – and it's given me the chance to meet many different kinds of people. Meeting different kinds of people is still the best possible education for any writer.

I suppose the major way journalism has helped me is that it's made me less precious about writing as a practice. Deadlines have to be met in journalism. There's no time to wince about a turn of phrase – just get it down on paper. That's very helpful for me, because I hate writing first drafts and would happily put them off whenever possible.

I'm not sure about key differences. One of the trends I've been happy to notice is that more writers are moving between non-fiction and fiction. Those distinctions, which were always more important for marketing than they were for literature, seem to

be less rigid. There are so many great current writers who write in many forms or who collapse different forms altogether — Maggie Nelson and Carmen Boullosa, for example.

*Are you working on any new fiction or memoir projects at the moment?*

Yup! I'm determined to finish my novel this year.

*Would you like to share an excerpt with us?*

I wish I could! I can tell you that it's a deconstructed Western, and it features a long road trip through the Pacific Northwest and the Northern Sierras.



## **Editors**

Angela Sells, PhD, is a mythology and poetry professor at Sierra College and Meridian University. She is an emerging author, with her first book, *Sabina Spielrein; The Woman and the Myth*, due out in August, 2017 from SUNY Press. She is a co-manager of The Open Book and co-founder of The Open Book Press.

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Thanks for reading!

