Monica Hanna: An Interview with Sesshu Foster

Sesshu Foster’s latest work, *World Ball Notebook* (City Lights, 2008), is a collection of prose poems structured around a soccer motif. The poems in WBN are titled “Game 1,” “Game 2,” etc., and Foster uses the game as an entry into everything from Mayan history to the landscape of contemporary southern California. In WBN, using the hybrid style that Foster has perfected over the years in books like *City Terrace Field Manual* (Kaya/Muae, 1996) and his novelistic debut *Atomik Aztex* (City Lights, 2005), the poet meditates on community and loneliness, family and friendship, work, and the writer’s life, among other topics.

Sesshu Foster was the first person who came to mind when we decided to focus on soccer for *Global Graffiti*’s inaugural issue. In the interview that follows, the prolific East L.A.-based writer, activist, and teacher riffs on soccer, poetic form, community-building, and politics. And we only scratched the surface!

**Q:** Can you tell us about the soccer frame that you use in *World Ball Notebook?* And what does the game itself mean in the book?

**A:** The soccer motif indexes the decade that I documented in the book: it’s a thread that runs through that period, when I was teaching full time at Hollenbeck Junior High School in East L.A., I was English department chair, I was union representative, I was writing several books, I was raising three kids, I was doing karate 15 to 20 hours per week, I was engaged in community activism in East L.A., doing anti-war work and organizing cultural events, including a community center called Cafe Cultural. It was a crazy period of big dreams and very little sleep. My kids wanted to participate in soccer, so of course I thought, “Oh no, not another thing to take care of?” 3 evenings per week hanging out in the park at soccer practice and all day Saturday or Sunday attending soccer games. I worked out with my wife that I would have one weekend day per week for writing time. But of course, these demands and duties sometimes turn out to be the best things ever, a better experience than the big plans we make ourselves. That’s the way soccer turned out for me. I’m no soccer fanatic, they didn’t have youth soccer when I was a kid, so I never played, but soccer turned out to be terrific fun times I spent with my kids, my own kids.

At the same time, Ruben Martinez asked me to co-sponsor a poetry writing workshop for teenagers at Hollenbeck Jr. High, and that was another activity I felt I didn’t need. But after seven years mentoring teen writers and watching them go from 13 years old to 20, some of them, workshopping their writing, taking them to perform public readings at street fairs, radio stations and literary venues around the city, I watched them use poetry to change their lives—that’s something we as writers may have only heard about. These kids focused on that essentially useful aspect of poetry—to express what’s most important in your own life?and they used writing as a ticket out of their own neighborhood (which many otherwise never left), out of their limited opportunities on the Eastside, used it to meet people across the city, and apply for performing arts summer school programs at local colleges and summer jobs?one student wrote an essay that got her a free trip to Spain from the Spanish consulate and went on to get an MFA in Creative Writing. Years later in 2007 as I was returning from the Mexico City Book Fair, trying to get through the Mexico City airport on a broken ankle, carrying my
bag badly with crutches, I bumped into one of the teen poets, now grown up, by chance also passing through the airport, who took my bag and carried it for me. She hesitated to admit that she didn’t write poetry anymore, but she used her writing skills to get a broadcast journalism degree, and is now a TV news producer. It turned out these demands and duties that were asked of me above and beyond my paid jobs, or official requirements, were the most rewarding ones. Maybe because they involved kids, my own and others. So that’s what soccer meant to me, in that decade. That decade is over; my kids grew up, they no longer play organized soccer, they went on to college, and I miss those evenings and days standing on the sidelines in the park—the smell of grass and sweat and footfalls pounding the earth.

Soccer, the game itself, playing on a team and attending games, also has figurative meanings and allusive or metaphorical functions in the book. I don’t want to outline them for the reader or underline any lines and say “pay special attention to this part here, this is the best part.” It’s true that the first team sport played with a rubber ball ever recorded was the Mesoamerican ballgame played by Mayans and other indigenous cultures, across a region stretching from Arizona (where there are stone ball courts north of Flagstaff) down into Guatemala, and that this game, still played in northwestern Mexico and called ulama, used to be played in empty lots in downtown Los Angeles until a few years ago.

Q: In a previous interview, you suggested that you like the prose poem because of its ability to represent a variety of different voices/positions in a way the traditional lyric may not. Can you say a little about this? We have in mind something Muriel Rukeyser wrote in her Life of Poetry about poetry being about community-building?

A: Part of the function of Walt Whitman’s (and of course Allen Ginsberg’s) long lines, built on anaphora and rhythmic parallelism, is a cataloguing description of the city and the urban experience. When I was younger this seemed easily the most dispensable or dismissable aspect of their work. Now I think seems much more necessary, and if “exterior” or materialist in its own way, suggestive all the same of subtle or mysterious democratic functions and reconfigurations accomplished in their poetics. I was originally very skeptical about the privileging of white space and enjambments around “broken prose” lines in the confessional or pastoral lyric poem prominent in academia from the 1950s through the 1980s. Beat, street and populist leftist performance poets adopted the same kind of flush-left poetry mannerisms when publishing their poems. Critics pointed out that breaking lines arbitrarily doesn’t turn automatically prose into poetry, and I had reservations about people snapping sentences into separate lines in a purely decorative manner, based on some vague sense that if it “looks like a poem” it’s going to walk like a poem, it will “be” a poem. I was suspicious of that. A lot of the conversational phrasing or phraseology laid out flush left on the page that’s obvious in Carl Sandburg or Charles Bukowski (to pick obvious examples) consists not so much of substantive prosody and more just a kind of mannered shorthand. It doesn’t bother me all that much as a reader, really?when Sandburg or Bukowski are very good they are very good no matter how the lines are laid out?they engage in speaking directly to the reader in ways that obscurantist experimenters all the rage in academia these days seem unable to do, because poets trapped in ivory towers don’t use poems for that essential purpose: to communicate, to build community. (Or maybe they define community narrowly as “tenure committee,” etc.)

Insofar as craft and poetics in a poem have a politics, I wanted to avoid that brittle enjambed-prose-sentence-lyric verse, where you have standard sentences snapped off and scattered decoratively across the page (which I might go out on a limb and say was characteristic of
some leftist poets, Beat poets, street poets and populist poets of the 70s and 80s—all of whom I basically view as comrades, I should probably say, to this day—and on the other hand I also wanted my poetics to operate differently than those more right-wing academics in practice—even if in their poems or statements they proclaim public leftist views or ideas?they remain academic poets, operating in elite university-supported circles, institutionalized and reading before institutional audiences, awarding grants and awards to each other, sitting on each other’s grants panels, awards and tenure committees, as Philip Levine admitted in an interview in Don’t Ask, giving prizes to friends. Their poetics reflects a lack of democracy in their practice as poets, the lack of a democratic poetics, in my opinion. The prose poem as I finessed or finagled it, jerry-rigged and duct-taped it together allowed for use and inclusion of caesura without enjambment, allowed for use and inclusion of other techniques without standard (or even standard experimental?) poetics and practice. I structured prose poems so as to allow for ample inclusion of wide-ranging language from diverse sources, diverse registers, diverse voices. Within the lines, and the sentences and the language, I wanted represented the democracy of the street, of my community, of our body politic.

Whitman made similar claims for poetry as Rukeyser, and accomplished a great deal of it in his work. Communication, common, community?they have the same root. In his essay, Democratic Vistas, Whitman wrote,

It really seems to me the condition, not only of our future national and democratic development, but of our perpetuation. In the highly artificial and materialistic bases of modern civilization, with the corresponding arrangements and methods of living, the force-infusion of intellect alone, the depraving influences of riches just as much as poverty, the absence of all high ideals in character?with the long series of tendencies, shapings, which few are strong enough to resist, and which now seem, with steam-engine speed, to be everywhere turning out the generations of humanity like uniform iron castings?all of which, as compared with the feudal ages, we can yet do nothing better than accept, make the best of, and even welcome, upon the whole, for their oceanic practical grandeur, and their restless wholesale kneading of the masses?I say of all this tremendous and dominant play of solely materialistic bearings upon current life in the United States, with the results as already seen, accumulating, and reaching far into the future, that they must either be confronted and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force-infusion for purposes of spiritualization, for the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics, and for absolute and primal manliness and womanliness?or else our modern civilization, with all its improvements, is in vain, and we are on the road to a destiny, a status, equivalent, in its real world, to that of the fabled damned.

Whitman refers to some purposes of poetry as spiritualization, for the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics, primal manliness and womanliness. Maybe in the 21st century we’d call these ideas and values by other terms. William Carlos Williams suggested that for lack of what is found in poetry that human beings die daily, and of course Williams worked throughout his adult life as a doctor, witness to illness and death in the community where he chose to live and work. And, in his long poem, Wichita Vortex Sutra, Allen Ginsberg described America during the height of its Vietnam War as that fabled damned?of nations, suggesting that the U.S. had already gone far down that solely materialistic road Whitman warned about.

Q: Could you elaborate a bit on this idea of spiritualization and how poetry can work toward that goal. You mention that we might use different language than Whitman’s in the 21st century to talk about the non-materialistic values that can be furthered by poetry. What kinds of terms do you think we might use in the 21st century to talk about those values? Do we need to name those terms? Why poetry? What is in poetry that can resist this spiritual/social
A: I think that poets define their own terms and values in their work. That’s why poetry. It’s the cutting edge of language? it’s most personal, most intimate, most direct language. Even objective reportage like Mark Nowak’s book on the crisis in coal mining and the risks for miners underground, Coal Mountain Elementary, projects a kind of intimate working class poetics that I think would be difficult to find anywhere outside of theater, or perhaps folk music. I see poets at their best as working on the cutting edge of language, defining new terms and values, redefining old categories of thinking and feeling. In my case for example, I was part of discussions where political activists, artists and writers voiced impatience with the recycling of hyphenated racial political identity categories of the 1970s, along with related political and cultural concepts which had a necessity and a currency in the 60s and 70s that they no longer attend. It’s 2010, and a lot of those terms and concepts are still recycled in the national discourse, for example where Barack Obama is called the first Black president, not the first Hawaiian-born president, not the first mixed-race president. In the 1990s it was widely apparent that terms like ?multicultural? for example had limited usefulness, if any at all, along with a lexicon of similar terms and ideas left over from decades ago, recycled like the marketing categories you may still encounter on books, ?women?s literature,? ?Native American Literature,? etc. The multiple registers, hybrid forms and language mix in my books come from that half-breed/hapa experience of growing up in various and mixed communities, in no way neatly encapsulated behind any single identity label, and therefore almost entirely excluded from the discourse, from any recognition or representation to this day. My work attempts a poetics that aims at (in Whitman?s words) subtle and tremendous force-infusion for purposes of spiritualization, for the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics? by attempting to articulate as only poetry and literature can: our secret, erased or denied histories, the fleeting awareness of actual experience as it is lived, our conflicted and irregular characters. The terrain of literature is the invisible and unspoken: interiority, relationships, thoughts, feelings. Poetry addresses these directly and I believe when it articulates them with any success (whether by student poets or hobbyists, professional careerists or mavericks), resists the relentless materialism of our lives. It’s all good, in that sense.

Though it’s beside the point, I think that’s exactly why you can’t make money from poetry, but you can make money from war.

Q: Your poetry seems very much concerned with the idea of community in relationship to a specific local space. Can you say a little about your focus on locality?

A: These questions have a tight focus, at least for me, as there’s necessary and organic overlaps between all these concepts. My parents were both veterans (my father was in North Africa during World War 2) who met as art students studying on the G.I. bill. They were part of the 1950s West Coast Bohemian counterculture, married as Zen Buddhists and living for a time at Ken Kern’s Oakhurst property (he was author of the ?Back to the Land? do-it-yourself manuals that he published himself like The Owner-built Homestead and Self-sufficiency on One Acre), and they were reading Rexroth’s poetry and translations of Japanese poetry, studying D. T. Suzuki and listening to Saburo Hasegawa’s lectures in San Francisco, painting Abstract Expressionism with house paint on plywood and getting sloshed on wine at parties from Bay Area to L.A. Books like On the Road make that kind of life seem like a never-ending party, but as a kid growing up half on the road all the time, it was no fun. The frantic Beat quest for new experiences over the next horizon, even if couched in the vocabulary of spiritual seeking, seemed like the spiritual equivalent of the frantic consumerism of consumer society. Instead of endless consumption of gadgets, physical comforts and material goods, the
seekers in the counterculture seemed embarked on endless consumption of mental trips and delusions, fantastic dreams and schemes, chasing thrills and illusions as empty of substance as Coca-cola and TV dinners, victory in Vietnam or getting rich by selling Amway products. My dad, when he ran out of road, when the ideas didn’t pan out and times got tough, just drank more and more. It got to be about that more than anything.

I was interested in a politics of place because we’d spent so much time on the road. When my mom had enough and finally split up with him, I was eight years old, and she drove us from Northern California to Los Angeles. Later I found out that dad had broken her nose and her hand and then he smashed every piece of furniture in the house. Before we drove away, I watched the cops cuffing my dad on the highway that ran in front of our house. When he saw me looking at him, as his hands were cuffed, he grinned at me. I never asked him why he had destroyed our house and hurt our mother; in my experience, he didn’t remember much at times like that. That was the end for my parents.

We stayed for awhile with one of mom’s brothers at his house in City Terrace, in East L.A. The year was 1965, with the Watts riots on TV, National Guardsmen firing tracer bullets from machineguns into buildings and neighborhoods on fire. Even as a kid, I could see I wasn’t in Kansas anymore. I’ve been studying the place ever since. The neighborhoods, how they fit into this city, how it all articulates in some essential way, with some essential finality, either the air-conditioned American nightmare? or American Dream.? It was obvious when I was a kid, also, that TV and other media presented nothing of the reality of the city east of the river. Prototypical L.A. movies like Blade Runner or Chinatown purport to tell the story of Los Angeles nationally and internationally use the essential ethnic character of the city and of the ?minorities? that make up the majority of the citizens as one-dimensional foils for a white cast. Perhaps not even that, perhaps minority characters are more like shadows, attached to two dimensional white characters to give them an illusion of depth. Tonto to the Lone Ranger, silly black sidekick to the white cop, etc.?Forget it, Jack, it’s Chinatown.? Given that kind of media representation, it was not strange to me that more than 10,000 men, women and children could be murdered in this city between 1985 and 1995 (according to a Harvard Medical School study) while during the same period, during the Irish ?troubles,? some 3,000 were murdered in Northern Ireland (according to the Irish Times), and 1,500 died through violence in Israel (according to an Israeli government website) while that country remained in a state of war with its neighbors, yet 10,000 murders of mostly citizens of color, many of them children, was treated with callous disregard (either in total silence or complete lack of any action whatsoever) in our own country by government leaders, state and national leaders. Like the ?body count? given for Vietnamese casualties on TV and in newspapers during the Vietnam War, the attitude displayed by the society showed fundamental contempt for the lives of the people I grew up with in East L.A. (This same more or less numerical attitude is shown toward Iraqi and Afghani civilian deaths during the current wars.) My work, teaching, activism, writing and books, have all mostly taken place in East L.A., within a couple adjacent neighborhoods along the 10 San Bernardino freeway. You know, for a number of years, I thought that most of those efforts were wasted. The students grow up and move away, the events we organized (such as bringing Salvadoran writers Manlio Argueta and Claribel Alegría to read in Boyle Heights) are long forgotten, the venues we organized are gone and forgotten, the wars go on, gang wars and drug wars come and gone and foreign wars going on and on, the schools are getting worse again due to budget cutbacks, etc. But I was giving a reading at Avenue 50 Gallery in Highland Park recently, and the realization struck me that there are more neighborhood coffeeshops, galleries and venues than ever on the Eastside; if you drive First Street, where Cafe Cultural only lasted a couple years, if that, across from Hollenbeck...
police station, on the same blocks there?¡s Casa 0101 Theater that was founded by Josefina Lopez, giving classes in theater arts to young people from the area, there?¡s art galleries and Abel Salas?¡s community magazine, Brooklyn and Boyle, and his art gallery and performance space, along with Eastsideluv, with its performance space where you might catch an open mic poetry reading or Gloria Alvarez reading love poems or Ruben Guevara (of Ruben and the Jets) jamming with former members of the Doors or new Eastside bands, or Willie Herron of Los Illegals. I realized that just because I wasn?¡t dreaming it, it didn?¡t mean that the dream was gone. I left the reading feeling great, thinking that that dream of community could go on independent of me forever. The dream goes on dreaming itself.

**Q:** Several of the pieces in *World Ball Notebook* contain reflections on writers and the writing process; the book also includes a couple of pieces by other poets [ed. note: WBN contains short pieces by Lisa Chen, Ruben Mendoza, and Jen Hofer]. Can you talk a bit about how you see the role(s) of the writer?

**A:** I?€ve mentioned in my books and in some of my responses given here how, besides just staying home to write, that I spent years doing all kinds of extraneous activities, marching in protest demonstrations, chairing meetings, planting trees in Nicaragua or traveling as a representative to the International Book Fair in Managua, traveling regularly across the West, sometimes on book tours on the West Coast or East Coast, tearing the guts out of one house and remodeling it, running workshops for aspiring writers, teen and adult, in East L.A. and downtown, raising my own kids, doing my chores around the house (one of the poems in my last book was written in my mind one October 8th, the day Che Guevara was killed in 1967, as I was thinking about his heroic failure and what it might possibly mean at this date?while washing the dishes?writing the poem in my head with my hands in warm soapy water). But I?¢d have to say that I think all those activities and the activism and most of the work I do is completely beside the point. The role of the writer is, in some way shape or form, just to write in the best way she or he can. Fundamentally and basically, that?¡s it. I believe that it?¡s enough. I am a restless person and I have drank 569,842 cups of coffee and drove the night streets for hours trying to think of quiet places I could drive around in my mind (and in my dreams I have dreamt that I drive down those avenues and streets), and I have pushed my stalled car off the freeway and up and down a side street between warehouses in the pouring rain until it started, and I have driven over the 101 freeway with a cup of coffee eating a hamburger with one hand while taking photographs of the downtown skyline with my left hand while at the same time steering my car with one knee. I know for a fact that this is not the right way to go about it.

My writing would be better if I was less busy in my spirit and my mind. If I wasn?¢t distracted by wars and riots and traffic, with the music turned up full blast, my books would be easier to read and make more sense. Writing is important enough, poetry is important and useful enough, to do on its own, for its own sake. The writer, the poet, gives essential expression to useful truths not found anywhere else in the community, that are necessary for the common life of that community. I believe that as Whitman suggests, that the writer and the poet serves ?purposes for spiritualization?or else modern civilization, with all its improvements, is in vain??especially when the rulers of the civilization are spending untold hundreds of billions of dollars to slaughter 900,000 Iraqis and who knows how many Afghans and doesn?¢t give a damn about what happens to the children in the streets of L.A. and people in these neighborhoods and all the neighborhoods in cities like L.A.

**Q:** Could you say more about the relationship between writing, work, and political involvement? This comes up a bit when you talk about William Carlos Williams who worked
as a physician and also when you talk about your teaching experiences and your involvement in extraneous activities. Are those really extraneous? I’m thinking also about your comment that The writer, the poet, gives essential expression to useful truths not found anywhere else in the community, that are necessary for the common life of the community. Perhaps there’s a necessary tension here between an artist’s involvement in the community and the need to have some distance from it (some quiet) in order to express those unexpressed truths?

A: Ah, I think there’s a high degree of tension involved in rushing around to do three different activities at once. Is all this activity extraneous? Probably not. You have a necessity to make money and pay your bills, get exercise and fresh air, enjoy yourself, make babies, cook and do the dishes, do your chores, STOP THE FUCKING WARS, stand up for yourself and your people, etc. Everybody will tell you everything else is more important than sitting around by yourself thinking and writing. If they see you sitting on the couch with a far-off look in your eyes, they’re gonna say, hey, help me carry something. Can you jump start my car? Can you donate some of your books to the library? You have to replace the rotten part of the deck. Somebody called and said call them back.

Sometimes I write a poem in my mind while washing the dishes or going on a hike, lots of times I discuss the politics of language with imaginary friends while driving down the boulevard or across the state. I’m always thinking about these issues, but sooner or later it comes down to sitting down somewhere by myself to write. Otherwise the writing won’t get done. I don’t think it’s too complicated. Really. What are the obvious and apparent necessary things to do? They are all material necessities, materialist. What is the denied, secret, hidden thing that you nevertheless must do in spite of the whole material world breathing down your neck 24/7? You must think, read and write. And when poets engage in that activity for themselves, in their way, they’re giving a gift of themselves and doing so for others who cannot.

It’s up to any artist to articulate the necessity for their art, because other people can’t do it for you. It’s that personal.

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