The SRPR Interview:
Carlo Matos and Amy Sayre Baptista

Simone Muench and Jackie K. White: While we (Simone and Jackie) are familiar with your project from your contribution to *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing* (Black Lawerence Press, 2018), could you share for new readers how this book of poems came about, some of its historical context, and how the poems you've selected here figure into the larger manuscript?

Carlo Matos and Amy Sayre Baptista: First, we want to thank you for including our work in your wonderful anthology. Besides the many staggering pieces of writing included (some we were lucky enough to hear performed live in one of the many events you organized here in Chicago), we were struck by the myriad ways writers could collaborate, by the sheer richness of what collaboration can be. As for *The Book of Tongues*, it began simply. Amy had written a poem about Inês de Castro that begins, "Unbury me. Reverse the dirt. Sink your arms elbow deep into the soil covering my body. This depth shows respect for the dead." Her poem describes King Pedro I exhuming the corpse of his dead lover, crowning her queen of Portugal, and then forcing the court to kiss her hand in submission; however, it is told from the perspective of Inês, who is not happy to have had her eternal rest disturbed in such a manner. Amy's poem has a rich, menacing darkness to it, and she performed it in a very sultry manner that suggested all kinds of deeper things buried in the soil beneath the dramatized moment. It was always a showstopper. For a number of years, Amy and I had been complaining that poetry readings were often boring, or rather, I had been complaining that my readings were boring. We both have performance backgrounds and wanted to add an explicitly performative element to liven up our own readings. Amy suggested we do persona poems in the voices of Inês and Pedro and then perform them in conversation.

What makes this story even more grotesque is the fact that it supposedly happened. After Prince Pedro's wife Constança of Castile died, Pedro thought he was free to openly pursue a relationship with his

lover, Inês (one of Constança's ladies-in-waiting). His father, on the other hand, fearing Inês's children would threaten the order of succession for the crown of Portugal, had her killed while Pedro was away hunting. Father and son nearly went to war. What's odder still is that this sordid tale of infidelity and murder is often considered a love story in Portugal.

We selected these ten poems because we thought they did a pretty good job introducing the major players in the manuscript and encapsulating some of the major themes. The dramaturgy of the book is largely recursive; that is, the characters can't seem to escape the gravitational pull of Inês's beheading. No matter how far they get, no matter how much time goes by, they are drawn ceaselessly back to the horror of that one red Sunday, so choosing a selection is challenging. We began with two characters and by the time we were done, we had invented an entirely new mythos. For example, Inês and Pedro's son, João becomes Bicho, a misshapen, Caliban-like creature obsessed with his mother's death and lashing out in all directions looking for revenge. João existed, but Bicho did not. We also invented a cult of women called the Wasp Eaters, who appear shortly after her death searching for their Wasp Queen's tongue cut from the corpse by Bicho (a relic so powerful it can prophesy, raise storms, and crush nations). Inês is and is not Inês, is the relic tongue, is a fig wasp queen—wingless, antennae-less, but ready to birth horrors in the service of all silenced women. We only intended it to be a short exchange, but before we got very far, we both knew we had something much vaster on our hands.

SM & JKW: We're curious, too, about the book title. In your process statement that appears in the anthology, you state "by the time we were done, we had a book-length manuscript titled *The Book of Tongues*, the story of a dead queen and the tongue that has not stopped talking for 600 years." When (and how) did you arrive at the title?

CM & ASB: The title of the book came unbidden pretty early on if I remember correctly, though I can't remember who suggested it, but it was only a working title for a long time. I was resistant to it for some reason but I can no longer remember why. I am pretty sure Amy was the one who introduced the idea of the tongue as a relic, which gave the first version of our manuscript direction and focus. It was our first

great addition to the historical narrative we had inherited. Originally, we were toying around with the idea of our manuscript being a found text; that is, we were toying around with a metafictional framework where "The Book of Tongues" was something akin to the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. In the introduction we wrote: "This partial manuscript was recently discovered bundled in a wineskin floating in the Atlantic off the coast of Nazaré, Portugal by a local fisherman." The fiction was that Amy and I were scholars or investigators of some sort who had been given the text to authenticate or translate or something (we hadn't quite figured that part out) when strange things began to happen to us—visitations, hauntings, voices, and threats. The more we investigated, the closer we got to the truth of Inês and the Wasp Eaters, who would eventually take Amy for one of their own. We liked the conceit, but it began to take over the manuscript so that what we really had was two different and competing fictions rather than parallel fictions that supported and complimented one another. We decided to abandon the idea of a literal "Book of Tongues" so that we could focus more on the dramatic possibilities of the characters and the poetic power of the image of the tongue itself. Though I didn't think the frame narrative worked, there were a couple of terrific—as in full of terror—moments that I wish we could have kept because they were scary enough not to be read late at night. Much of the frame narrative was done in a series of lengthy endnotes, and there is one where the ghost of Inês haunts Amy from the in-between of her night mirror. We were able to salvage some of the content from this note:

> She knocks her head hard again against the glass. Three strands of hair land over her empty eye sockets. A left hand appears, and then a shoulder, skin slipping away. Never all of her at once. More memory than flesh. She bangs her forehead, not her hand. The glass vibrates. With each blow, the strands of hair adhere to the window then list away from her head like a spider casting a web. We are face to flesh. She shudders, and half her rib cage glitters against the dark. I reach for all I have lost. My fingers meet glass. I think we are glass…

Amy and I wrote this book to loosen, as it were, Inês's tongue—the titular organ that has gained amazing and terrible powers for anyone brave enough to hear what it speaks—so that Inês may shout down the decidedly patriarchal narrative that makes a love story of a gruesome silencing.

SM & JKW: The concept of "tongue" seems to be the fulcrum of the manuscript, creating a sense of multivocality, given that these epistolary poems center five tongues: the historical figures of Inês de Castro and King/Prince Pedro, the tongues of Carlo Matos and Amy Sayre Baptista, as well as the collaborative tongue—the twining of your voices as collaborators. Could you speak to that dynamic?

CM & ASB: Carlo and I often discussed the sort of *Rashomon* style of storytelling. That at the essence every human encounter is a book of tongues if captured in its fullness. We don't always see it, but the narrative exists.

In terms of the dynamic, neither of us were interested in prescribed roles. Carlo wanted to write as Inês and I *needed* to write as Pedro for him to be human to me. Not just the cardboard machismo of the myth. We moved fluidly from character to character. As Carlo said, "loosing the tongue" really let the characters build their own vocabulary which means every character, even when they are not speaking, has a memory of events they were involved in or heard about. This character memory gave us flexibility to build emotional depth in a scene and let the scene ask a lot of questions. So, what happens, emotionally, directionally, with revoicing a memory? It can't just be a repeating, it has to be a re-seeing. Sometimes it works better than others, but here is an example where it does.

The second poem I wrote prior to Carlo and I starting the project was one where Inês says, *I am a tongue drenched in the Tagus*. The Tagus being an important river geographically and metaphorically, that flows through three areas she inhabited in her life. The line is meant to evoke an origin story between her body and the land. A rootedness, not the commodification of her by the powers at the court. In terms of bloodline, she was as royal as he was and wanted to remind him that she was of the land as much as he, and maybe more so. This poem, originally in Inês's voice, describes a sexual encounter between Pedro and Inês where she makes her "point" to Pedro about his assuming too much authority with her, using a meat knife. When I wrote it, the scene shows her asserting herself, projecting her power. In the most recent version, Carlo redrafted the scene from Pedro's voice. From his perspective, we see not just her power but his vulnerability and his acceptance of her feelings. In his voice, he names and acknowledges

his own failings. In the original, she said, "In time, you will understand…" but in the current version, he admits that he sees all this in her and he does "…understand that borders exist even a king dare not cross." He respects her beyond just desiring her. Consequently, in the rewrite, in tapping Pedro's memory, we accomplished her ferocity and added the tenderness and honoring. It was good to let them have that moment in a mostly darker story of love thwarted.

SM & JKW: For example, given the male-female dialogue of your project, readers might assume that Amy wrote as "Inês" and Carlo as "Pedro." Is that the case? Or did you both compose each letter or edit one another's letters or swap roles?

CM & ASB: We were always switching, swapping, and editing. Some lines, I remember writing, but mostly the power is in the combining. Collaboration with us felt very much like a séance in that you start as one character and out of nowhere you realize the voice is someone new, often in reaction to what another character says. For instance, we had discussed adding in Constança but had not written much about her and then one day in reaction to a line Carlo wrote as Pedro, I remember Constança being born on the page for me. She was powerful! I remember thinking that she might be the true sage of the piece. Certainly, she sprang forth in such a way I understood her as clearly as anyone. Like suddenly, she had the ability to be a cipher. I don't even remember what Carlo wrote that set this off, but I remember clearly that feeling of finding her stake in the drama. That is a trip! And that is when the collabo is really singing. We give each other a lot of freedom this way and it pays off.

Between the two of us, the swapping roles or editing really happens in a chaotic sort of flow. We know each other well, so our conversations about life and what we were living through at any moment fed the story too, not autobiographically, but emotionally. Inês and Pedro met in their late teens and twenties, but as writers we come to the story having both been through a divorce, we are caretakers of parents and children. Thus, in the resurrection persona or the destabilizer that is grief, we knew well in ourselves and in each other.

SM & JKW: Besides the main motif of "tongues," other repeating elements include ghosts, insects, borders/thresholds, wings, and the

color blue ("blue hours," "blue bottle," blue-white stars) as well as images of violence, particularly of the severed head. Can you speak to this constellation of images, why you are drawn to them and how they function in the manuscript?

CM & ASB: If we are speaking of intention, the repeating elements shore up the tension in the emotional and physical landscape. They form a visual through line. Perhaps the color blue is just that. Much of Portugal for us is the proximity to sea and coastline—the pull of it. In the book *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan describes a hummingbird's attraction to the color red and how they see in ultraviolet light, so their red is much more intense than ours. I think I can say, the blue of Portugal is like that. A blue of its very own defined in our perception, probably intensified with memory. We waxed pretty esoteric in this work, so maybe, it is a tarot poetics, the deeper symbols of our own identities surfacing. I am not sure. We wanted very much to acknowledge that Inês was slain by the same system she was born for. She was at birth a commodity. In the lyric as with the images, we are always loosening and constricting. If the book is her body, as we say, then the repeating images are the rhythm of the breath.

SM & JKW: For the *They Said* anthology, you placed your work in the "cross-genre" category. Could you discuss your choice of that category and of the epistolary and prose poem genres? To what extent do you see that hybridity and potential tension as related to the historical narrative and larger argument of the book?

CM & ASB: Once we abandoned the frame narrative, I think I suggested we turn them into letters—ghost letters or dead letters that magically appear from the beyond. I love the epistolary tradition, and have wanted to do a purely epistolary manuscript for some time. I have used this form in previous books—particularly in *The Secret Correspondence of Loon & Fiasco*—but never to this extent. Letters allow us to keep the immediacy we were originally looking for when we were only thinking about these poems as closers for our readings and also provide an easy-to-understand form that could help keep the reader grounded in a manuscript that is always reaching towards the mythic, the mysterious, or the macabre. The decision to make them prose poems was twofold. Since the manuscript lacks a narrative that

develops along the more conventional lines of conflict dramaturgy, we thought another structural element might help the reader feel the control of the authors. Though the content often refuses to hold our hands, the formal qualities—hopefully—help the reader along. These are letters. They are written by recurring characters. The prose chunks are familiar if not exactly welcoming. Secondly, I have used this kind of hybrid, flash paragraph in two previous books, which like *Tongues* demand the extreme compression of poetry but have narratives that must be carried along more carefully rather than merely suggested. This form, in my opinion, is best suited for telling stories that are obsessional, that don't develop so much as compress like a neutron star being slowly eaten by a black hole, whose gravitational waves are so strong that it warps the fabric of space-time. This analogy, for me, really captures the experience of reading the entire manuscript. As dramatic as I think the narrative is—and there have been plays and operas written in Europe about these two historical figures before—it isn't the part we were drawn to. It isn't the story that calls to us, it is the silence, or how a narrative can be hijacked, or maybe how, in some important ways, not much has changed since the fourteenth century.

SM & JKW: It also seems that the epistolary poem is particularly suited to collaboration, but were there any difficulties that arose from this structure?

CM & ASB: Letters have similar advantages to plays. Letters are immediate because they, like plays, have an audience in mind. You are writing "to" someone, like when characters speak to one another on the stage, not just "at" the universe. That person is someone specific not some vague mirror image of yourself—though maybe we never quite escape that last part. And when it comes to collaboration, it would suggest a really obvious and clear way to work: Amy writes Inês and I write Pedro, but that is not what we did. In fact, we decided from the beginning that we would not do that. We were not interested in Inês-as-Amy or Pedro-as-Carlo. This made the collaboration easier because we didn't have to wait for one person to finish a letter for the other to write a response. And because we didn't feel like we "owned" a character, it made revision easier because we weren't worried about offending the other person or feeling protective of our own work. We agreed from the start that we could write from any voice, which

is likely why other voices beyond the main two also got included. Originally, it was only going to be Pedro and Inês, but Constança, Bicho, and so many others began demanding to speak not too long after we got started. We also agreed that we could revise any poem in any way we saw fit without asking or even keeping track. This decision may seem risky but it was really the secret to our being able to finish the manuscript. I honestly don't know, for the most part, who started what poem or who made what revisions, which—in my honest opinion—has made the pieces so much stronger. These are not poems we would have written on our own, even if we had the same conceit. Amy and I have had many long conversations about what is or is not happening in the book, what is happening with our characters, what themes need more development, or what needs to be cut or expanded, but we have never had a single argument about any of it. I'm not saying we always agree because we don't, but because we both feel ownership over the whole and not over little parts, we never fight about individual poems. There is no reason to fight. If someone wants to change something, they can go and change it. If the other notices the change, then either the change was good or it wasn't. If they don't think it works, they can then go work on it and change it again. If the change goes unnoticed, then it means one person got to fix something that was bugging them and the other person was fine with either version. I'm not convinced I could have worked this way with anyone else. I am thankful for Amy's desire for true collaboration. It has been an easy process for me collaborationwise. It has been harrowing—in the best of ways—in a writing sense.

SM & JKW: On a related note, as you both are engaging historical figures and, in a sense, collaborating with their voices, what were some of the challenges in trying to inhabit them and giving voice to their stories? Did you find yourselves, singularly or collaboratively, leaning more toward historical reportage or mythmaking?

CM & ASB: Beyond the myth, the research is what keeps the characters talking. One interview that was particularly important for me was talking to Dr. Silvia Oliveira of Rhode Island College. Speaking with her really positioned Inês in the politics of the day. She made those politics come alive to me. Inês's beheading is a sword swung by Portuguese conquest. She was in the way of a possible succession that

powers greater than the one that protected her could wield. Like the victims of many oppressions, she was slain by the same system she was born to serve. We voiced this idea most directly in the letter where Inês describes her body as geography: "Star charts and diagrams rove my womb a lasting treaty."

Collaboratively, we both come to writing with a sense of movement from performance backgrounds, and we have talked in depth about the physical nature or muscularity of scene creation. Movement in an epistolary piece is essential or it becomes flat and too talky. We are often thinking about how the language gestures in the current "scene" but also how it flexes back on the wider historical scope. The visual gesture layers the lyricism so that the history feels immediate.

For instance, in the piece that includes the head of Diogo Alves, Bicho is telling his father, King Pedro, how Inês's tongue landed as an artifact in a museum, but what he is really doing is animating the scene while at the same time tying these two severed heads together in a dramatic role reversal. The tongue of Inês is "speaking" but the present movement comes from the reanimation of Diogo Alves's severed head. The reader's eye becomes a camera angle that directs the scene from point A to point B via the grotesquerie of dragging his own head using his tongue like an appendage. We sought this kind of layering of present and past throughout the book, the literal dragging forth of a gruesome history and all the ways the past and present continue to meet one another. Like Carlo mentioned earlier, the one red Sunday of Inês's death continues to echo in these other violences and she comes to reclaim them.

SM & JKW: We also noted that you include some code-switching, working in the Portuguese of Inês and Pedro—and of your own linguistic heritage. How did you collaborate regarding that kind of language play?

CM & ASB: Carlo and I have discussed how deeply memory leans on language. We do share that, even though our tactile language experience is different. That difference is apparent even in dreams. When I dream in Portuguese, it is almost always someone speaking to me, or I have a dream that I can hear someone speaking in Portuguese and I am following the voice like a scent, that the voice is just ahead of me around each corner. I rarely dream in conversation. Carlo is

fluent, though, but usually only dreams in full conversation in times of profound stress in the United States or if he is in-country and speaking Portuguese more than English. So really language cannot be separated from the memory of it. The lived experience of language is with us working in the background. In terms of the code-switching, those words are the ones that land especially naturally. We used Portuguese in the narrative where it felt intentional or expansive to the meaning of the lines.

SM & JKW: Another variation in the language, at least in one of the letters included here, is when Inês signs off as "Bicho." Could you comment on that, on whether there are other such variations, why or how that occurred in your process of crafting or revising?

CM & ASB: Actually, it isn't Inês at all. It is Bicho speaking to his father. As Carlo described, Bicho witnesses his mother's death as all the children did. Most histories of the event include the fact that she was killed in front of her children. Oppression creates witnesses purposefully to let the retelling control others by fear. Here, with Bicho, we wanted to create a character to embody the physical distortion of such fear and to embody its rebellion. So Bicho is at once created by his mother's murderers and is ultimately the destroyer of all they hoped to achieve. He is one of the main vehicles for reframing her narrative. I say vehicle because he literally carries her through time and physical space. Part of the tragedy that the myth of Inês and Pedro elides is that their historical son, João, murders his own wife. I found that fact the first time I was in Alcobaça one summer doing research. Alcobaça is home to the monastery where Pedro and Inês are buried—the mythic high point for those who romanticize the story. I was there in July and it was unseasonably hot. But the cloister interior was a relief from the temperature. The marble is white and cool like the myth, far removed from the legacy of violence. The tombs are laid out so that upon resurrection the first sight the lovers see will be each other. The truth is the tombs were not originally laid out this way, but only after being desecrated by the French, so the resurrection meeting is another part of the fantasy. The other truth, that a son who watched his mother murdered would kill his own wife, felt again like a return to the outside. The narrative we built is in the heat and Bicho is the bridge between those two spaces.

SM & JKW: All in all, the book has a tragic Shakespearian aura, a kind of perverted *Romeo and Juliet* plot of star-crossed lovers with one's corpse exhumed, but, of course, this *historical* narrative shows how the universal and timeless both transcend culture and, as you two shift from elevated to more colloquial language throughout, open up contemporary insights about the tensions between love and politics. Could you talk some about your goals for collaborating through the past to the twenty-first century with this project?

CM & ASB: Amy and I are currently at work on a second testament. We are not sure if it will be a part of *The Book of Tongues* or if it will be a new book. This testament is related to the first but independent of it—a Portuguese American story fully realized in a present that brings the reader into the twenty-first century with a new couple, Nani and Cyra, who echo, queer, and undermine Pedro and Inês's narrative. These are the spiritual children of Inês reborn centuries later in the trauma of her beheading. With the devotion of Heathcliff and Catherine but the rebellion of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe, Nani and Cyra were born knowing that subversion is the key to their survival. They are witnesses to a new world, but not the one their parents' dreams promised them. The stench of colonialism is inherent in their shared trauma. As they seek a new identity, they are led by an old voice only they can hear. The voice or the tongue of the old world speaks an esoteric language only they understand. But the choice to continue to speak the language or let it die drives their quest, and ultimately, this quest is an exorcism. It is an epistolary chronicle of their subversion which becomes, ultimately, their path to destruction or freedom.

We are altering our process slightly for this testament because the demands of the section are a little different. Where Pedro and Inês were characters from history and often speaking from beyond the grave, this new pair are concrete people of the present. Amy and I have decided to assume the personas of these characters and actually send the epistles to one another in real time and in this way create the narrative for this section. We feel this slight change in our process will maintain the voice and form of the first testament but give it a character all its own. We will continue to revise as before but I'm curious to see if this modification in process will work or if we will return to what we did with the original in terms of writing from any voice. It is still

too soon to say, but one of the interesting things is how the twenty-first century has already begun making itself felt for Cyra and Nani:

> Cyra,
>
> This is how civilizations are brought low, at the beg and fancy of those who do not know how to keep their hands to themselves. And here we are again, fearing behind our home-made, t-shirt facemasks. Here we are again like when we were children feeling most unsafe when we were happy. Please write to me, a note to say you are still there.
>
> Your Nani

SM & JKW: Finally, drawing again on your process statement in *They Said*, you refer there to the "ecstatic experience" of constructing this manuscript together: in what ways do you see collaboration as an ecstatic act? Will you continue to write with one another, with others? What advice would you give to those who are interested in writing collaboratively?

CM & ASB: I talked a little about the nuts and bolts of our collaborative process above but when we say it was an ecstatic experience, I don't think we are exaggerating much. Amy and I came to this project with very modest and simple goals, and in a blink we had invented a new religion, taken a historical figure from a parent culture we share but feel almost entirely divorced from and turned her into a mythic force as arcane as an old god painted on a cave wall, and found in the heart of her all the hurt of betrayal and loss. We were surprised by the loss of innocence which was never as lily-white as we pretended it was and of a desire to be young and uncompromising all over again. We wrote the first draft in a frenzy in four months, were finalists for the Rose Metal Press chapbook contest, and had a full-length draft in a year. Poems came from nowhere or from everywhere. Like most writers, I have a journal full of orphaned phrases and lines waiting for a proper home and nearly every single one of them became a poem, as if the merest suggestion of any idea whatever would find its way into the mouths of our various protagonists. Characters we weren't looking for began speaking to us, through us. The landscape was so vast and large it devoured it all and was still asking for more. It has been a singular experience.

Advice? That's a tough one. Never met a bit of advice I didn't suspect of treachery. What I will say is this, I feel people often get hung up

on minor things that have no real impact on the big picture. There is nothing wrong with striving for perfection as a writer, of course. That is what we do, but there is a difference between perfecting your language and fussiness. Fussiness is often a way of avoiding the larger questions in your work by focusing too much on the very small, and it often leads to overworking your lines and killing what is spontaneous and authentic in them. And, more importantly, it can kill a collaboration cold. I think I'll end with a bit of advice from the Wasp Eaters to my fictional self—one of the footnotes we abandoned from the original draft:

> Hear us when we say, the bones of a ghost must be eaten like the bones of a sardine, chewed slowly, carefully, so as not to prick the tongue and throat on the way down. Ghosts are often filled with crooked and indigestible truths that haunt a storyteller through lifetimes. Your suggestions, your blatant misunderstandings are well noted. Be warned yourself: of what you say and of what you swallow.