

Education and writing inspire this Inland Empire poet

Daily Bulletin

<https://www.dailybulletin.com/2020/12/31/education-and-writing-inspire-this-inland-empire-poet/> 1/7

By PATRICK BRIEN || PUBLISHED: December 31, 2020 at 8:00 a.m. | UPDATED: December 31, 2020 at 8:01 a.m.

When Romaine Washington was ten years old, her teacher gave the class an assignment to write a poem.

“They thought I copied it from somewhere and grilled me on it,” said Washington. “At first, I was upset that they thought I cheated, and then I realized it was because they thought the poem was good. This gave me the confidence to keep writing.”

Washington was born and raised in San Bernardino, describing it as a place where there were tumbleweeds, farms, and orange groves.”

“It was an All-American city, and the Westside had many thriving black-owned businesses,” she said. “In my mind’s eye, it was like a black idyllic Mayberry RFD, and even if it wasn’t, I felt safe enough to mesh the two together.”

After moving to Rancho Cucamonga 15 years ago, Washington watched it earn the distinction of being an All-American city last year.

“I thought it was an ironic and disconcerting deja vu because I watched San Bernardino slowly morph into the reputation it currently has,” she said.

Washington’s love of writing began with reading. Growing up as a self-described latchkey kid with asthma, Washington explained that when she couldn’t go out to play and didn’t have anyone to talk to, she could always rely on books.

She earned her Bachelor of Arts in French from Cal State San Bernardino, after which she worked for non-profit organizations before deciding to get a master’s in education from Azusa Pacific University.

During her first year as a high school teacher, Washington signed up to participate in the Inland Area Writing Program at the UC Riverside.

“I was invited back to be a workshop presenter and then a facilitator for the summer program,” she said. “For two years I was poet-in-resident for the Inland Area Writing Program.”

At this time she also started teaching as an adjunct at Azusa Pacific in the Cultural Language and Diversity Program.

Washington had begun to see her poetry get published, as well.

“Each time I am published it is my favorite accomplishment because of the process of submission, rejection and acceptance being such a job unto itself,” she said.

She points to having so many of her poems published in the anthology “San Bernardino, Singing” as an accomplishment of which she is particularly proud. Having her book of poetry “Sirens in Her Belly” put out by Jamii Publishing, also stands out, especially because an editor from Black Entertainment Television put it on their top ten must-read books of 2016.

Washington continues to draw inspiration from reading but also says that conversations are also key, especially the ones where she feels like she can’t say what she wants to say.

“I give the experience voice in poetry,” she said.

Washington said that the pandemic has, in some ways, made her feel like she is that latchkey kid again who lived in books and on the phone.

“Now I live in books and on Zoom,” she said. “My biggest challenge has been wanting to participate in too many things. When we return to normal where we can meet in person, I hope we can have a hybrid of Zoom and in person.”

[Washington](#) is also an occasional contributor to this publication, with the [Inlandia Literary Journals](#) column. Under the creative umbrella of the [Inlandia Institute](#), Blacklandia is an African-American consortium of creative people. Washington describes two interview projects she is working on for the group. “Voices of Our Elders” looks at the challenges and victories of African Americans who have roots in San Bernardino. “Healthy Heritage Movement – Broken Crayons Still Color” provides more information about mental health in the African-American community.

Washington is also working on an as-yet-unnamed poetry collection that she hopes will be published in 2021, as well as a short collection of poems about being from a closed adoption.

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