

“MATTHEW HITTINGER: THE BRIDE OF HYBRIDA” INTERVIEW

This interview [appeared](#) on Neil de la Flor's blog [Almost Dorothy](#) as part of his [Potty Mouth Series](#).

Almost Dorothy's Potty Mouth Interview series is back, yahoo!, with a new interview with the fabulous poet Matthew Hittinger, who may be one of the infamous X-Men (or Women). It doesn't get better than this. Matthew Hittinger is pretty darn awesome even if he doesn't get to wear white on his wedding day. (More on that later.) In our interview, Matthew reveals & rumbas about hybrid poetry, splicing & dicing literary forms, queerness, and the art of identity or the identity of art. We talk about X-Men, Jeanette Winterson, and Alice in Wonderland. I may have just made that up, but you'll find out if you read on, sisters & brothers. I dare you. Enjoy Matthew Hittinger: The Bride of Hybrida. Smiles.

Matthew Hittinger: Do I get to wear white?

Almost Dorothy: Hush baby, don't you worry, I do the interviewing around here. You can wear white if I can wear my ruby red platforms.

AD: Now that we got that settled, a real question. If you were a hybrid mythological creature combined, spliced together from two or three, a *hybrida* of sorts, which mythological creature would you be, and why?

MH: Of the known mythological creatures I'm partial to the Phoenix in all its many incarnations, in particular the original Chris Claremont [Dark Phoenix saga](#) (X-Men comics). I reflect daily upon Jean's struggle to balance her mortal emotions and desires with her newfound source of unlimited cosmic power. And I like when the unassuming, minor character rises to center stage. I'm an air sign (Gemini) so I like things that fly, and I have fire signs in my moon and rising (Aries and Leo respectively) so I'm drawn to fiery things. There are also the obvious associations of death and rebirth with the Phoenix, which appeals to me given the many metaphorical deaths and rebirths I've undergone throughout my adult life. Those reinventions as you remake your image in the wake of a failed relationship or geographical move or job change. Which sounds a lot like Madonna. Can I consider her a mythological creature? Speaking of Madonna, I like the mermen in her "Cherish" video, and wouldn't mind being one of them, just as long as I could transform my fish tail into legs when on land. But I think it would be fun to be able to breathe under water and explore the oceans and talk to dolphins or whatever it is mermen do.

AD: I used to be a merman before I had my tail removed. It was fun. Tell us a little about your theory and love of hybrid forms. And, how does it influence your writing?

MH: Well, I think I should start by clarifying what I mean by a hybrid form. Since I am primarily a poet, I'm curious about what happens to the boundaries of a poem when the poem meets another medium or genre. It can be as simple as a dramatic monologue and how it fuses the lyric, narrative, and dramatic in one space, or the prose poem's ditching of the line break, to more experimental forms like the video poem, or the sequential "breaks" of panels in a comic book poem. The concept of "both/and" is important here, when you take elements of two distinct mediums and create "mash-ups" where the new form retains elements of its two source mediums while creating a fertile third space that transcends its parts. Hybrid forms have the potential to forge a new way of seeing or thinking via the transformation

that takes place when its parts meet and breed.

Part of the appeal is the challenge: I like to push myself to not only master forms, but push those forms further, to do something new with them. One of my favorite mentors in graduate school, the Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison, reminded us the sun and moon were always going to be there; it was what we did with them, the challenge of revivifying the old forms and images, that was our task. I've taken that very much to heart.

The project where I have experimented the most with hybrids is currently shelved. It's sort of a trilogy of books. The first part of the story is told through a mash-up of poetry and comic book panels and is complete. The second part of the story is told through an opera libretto, and I was about half-way through when I lost steam. A version of the third section is done, but I want to play around with mashing up music staves with the poems. The thing I learned the most from the process of writing it, is how important multi-vocality is to me, having different tones on the page as a feeling or idea is thought through. I've applied that technique to some of my poems like "Square Dance" where the speaker of the poem is broken up by a square dance caller's instructions. I'm finding composers like this aspect of my writing and I have a few projects in the works where poems are being adapted into art songs. So that has been the main influence of hybrid forms on my writing: providing a vehicle for me to more accurately register my thinking and experience, more acutely convey my way of seeing.

AD: Mongrel, mule, the product of high and low class, a sign of mixed-breeding, are words used to define hybrids like the Pat Robertson and the Prius!, which isn't a bad car btw. But, aren't we all mixed-breeds? Children of third spaces and un-classifiable categories even if we think and pray to god we're neatly packed into identifiable squares or canons?

MH: Oh totally, though I'd be okay remaining un-classifiable. I don't want my work explained away by a label. Acknowledge the traditions I engage, sure, and the variety and multitude of inspirations and sources we all pull from, fine, but don't stop there.

You know, I have yet to read thoroughly that recent *American Hybrid* anthology, but based on its introduction, it seems to define "hybrid" solely through aesthetics, specifically anything that blends traditional forms with experimental forms. Well, I think one could blend two traditional forms and get something hybrid too, so I'm a bit disappointed in the scope of that definition, especially since a hybrid poem to me is more than just blending two schools of poetry. I like when something outside the traditional boundaries of poetry comes into play as part of the form.

That anthology also seems to be mainly white poets of a certain class. Now I'm a white poet of a certain class, queer too, but even I would argue from my privileged position that the question of identity must also be considered when discussing hybrids. Now I define identity in myriad ways: sexuality, geography, gender, race, genetic make-up, language, cultural influences, etc. We're all complicated "mixed-breeds" as you say. The question I want to pose is, do the more "marginal" identities, identities outside the mainstream, identities outside the traditional canons, identities that have been considered outlaw at one point of another, that are often hybrid in and of themselves, feel a draw to hybrid forms that more accurately mirror their hybrid identity? I'd like to see that question explored, especially by writers with more "hybrid" identities than my own.

AD: Well, I explore all kinds of bread—whole wheat, honey whole wheat, rye, French, pudding—but I think that identity is inherently hybrid and often we fight against that reality. Identity is fractured at birth, fractal-ized, and tortured. We are hidden in some decentralized, de-compartmentalized idea of who we think we are or were.

MH: Clearly hybrid forms are open to anyone with the vision to attempt and be successful at them. I guess I just want to complicate that *American Hybrid* definition of the hybrid. We may all be “mixed-breeds,” but some of us draw more inspiration from that status, or find that our “mixed” or “other” status falls outside what others have deemed “the norm”. For me, it is a simultaneous act of embrace and struggle there in the margin that allows for the experimentation with form. Traditional forms don’t always encompass or fully capture my experiences, and when that happens, I turn to hybrid forms to better register my voice. I suspect this is the case for others as well. On the flip side, you can bring innovation to traditional forms, both from the place of identity and from the desire to “make it new” that has nothing to do with hybridity.

The square is my least favorite geometric form, by the way.

AD: Squares are hot! So, “I am a poet”, “I am a painter”, “I am a fiction writer”, and “I am a goat” will no longer exist as fixed points on a single plane?

MH: I can only speak for the poet and painter who are currently inhabiting the same point on the same plane, though not at the same time. My goat, Douglas, ran off with a fiction writer in a paper airplane, so, time zones aside, I don’t know what state they’re in, let alone what dimension.

AD: 3 hybrid works that changed your mind about something?

MH: Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*. The fractal poetics work in Alice Fulton’s *Sensual Math* and *Felt*. And much of Anne Carson’s work, such as her turn to performance in recent years, mashing video and dance and audio layers in to her readings, and her latest book-box *Nox*.

AD: In her book *Art Objects*, Jeanette Winterson writes that “every day, in countless ways, you and I convince ourselves about ourselves. True art, when it happens to us, challenges the ‘I that we are” (15). Is the process of canonization the systematic destruction of identity?

MH: Ah, the ‘I’ we construct, just like the speakers we construct in our poems, versions of the ‘I’ but never the true ‘I’ if there even is such a thing.

Does “true art” (whatever that is) challenge the ‘I’ we’ve constructed for ourselves because it is a radical way of seeing? Or not even radical, just another way of seeing? Or a way of seeing beyond the mundane routines of our lives? Or a calling attention to the mundane routines of our lives? Does true art replace your ‘I’ with another ‘I’?

Does canonization destroy individual identity in readers/viewers/participants by privileging a core group of artists and writers, their identities and ways of seeing, over the masses? Does canonization destroy the individual identity of the author or artist via the process of canonizing? Does canonization destroy and erase the identities of those writers and artists not chosen as part of the canon?

AD: I have no idea. That's why I asked you. Now, I'm going to have to ask someone else. You're fired!
Serious question: Define the verb to hittinger?

MH: Something related to discourse, in particular the feline way in which one goes about discoursing. Actually, it depends on how you pronounce it. If you pronounce it like we're in mathematics class, then I guess you could say I like to take fragments and make whole units out of them. Speaking of which, there are parts of my last name on urban dictionary with definitions I can't repeat here. For the record, my family pronounces it with a soft 'g', but it has nothing to do with domestic violence.

AD: When you walk (or bike?) to work, what grabs your attention (or butt)?

MH: Facades, storefronts, subway windows, sunglasses. Reflections of people and objects usually grab my attention more than actual people and objects. Anything orange. Cats. Grammatical errors on store signs. Innovative tattoos and cute kicks, especially of the puma and tiger variety.

AD: One more question about hybrids, in-breeds, high breeds, and braided bread. In your essay "On the Transformative Power of Hybrid Forms" you write that hybrid forms are "new" forms that "can fully capture your experience and identity as someone orbiting the mainstream." What happens if hybrid becomes mainstream or your orbit collides with an asteroid?

MH: I guess it depends which main stream you find yourself swimming in, and if you prefer hunting for crayfish under logs and rocks or fishing in a stream fully stocked with trout. It also depends on how well you are at recombining your molecules and atoms after impact with said asteroid.

AD: Ever been stuck in a dream, drama, or dream-drama?

MH: I've written a few dream-dramas. And one time I was stuck in a dream and then woke to find I was stuck in another dream, which led to some drama.

AD: What are you working on now? Can we read a few lines?

MH: I just finished a sequence of poems based on colors and have started a sequence called "The Book of M" which will be a double narrative of sorts. Reading up on my Marilyn Monroe (we share the same birthday, June 1st).

Here is an excerpt from "Black & White Gotham" which is a new form for me, the numbered list:

35. The black and white bookmark holds the place of a snapshot.
36. The snapshot is not a photo.
37. This is not a photo or a snapshot but has become again a mural.
38. That mural in a men's room that is not a men's room.
39. That men's room that is not a men's room plays home to a wooden table.
40. There may be a chair at that table.
41. There may be two chairs at that table.
42. There is a question sitting at that table but no words are said.

And I thought you might like these lines from another one of the color poems, "Blue Gotham":

and it reminded me of the blue
and white check dress Dorothy wore to Oz and the blue
dress and white apron Alice wore to Wonderland and the royal blue
mantel Mary of the sea wore...

MH: So Almost Dorothy, have you ever met Almost Alice? Are you the Britney to her Christina?

AD: I met Almost Alice once and I almost punched her lights out because she tried to take advantage of my pet lion. We made up and made out a for a few hours, which was fine, except she has buckteeth that have been airbrushed out of her PR promo pics. I ain't no Britney or Christina. I prefer to be Cher and/or Chaka Kahn. Well, Mr. (or Mrs.) Hittinger, I haven't used any bad words yet, so I'll say *fuck*. How does this make you feel?

MH: A well-placed "fuck" is like a well-timed "fuck". I prefer the monosyllabic over the polysyllabic when I don't know what to say. So fuck supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.