

# 126. Birthing Language w/ Aimee Suzara

**Daniel Dissinger:** [00:00:00] Hi, everyone. Welcome to another episode of Writing Remix. I'm your host, Daniel Dissinger, and today I have a very special guest. We have poet, playwright, educator from Oakland, California, Aimee Suzara. Aimee, thank you so much for being here.

**Aimee Suzara:** Thank you for having me.

**Daniel Dissinger:** I- I'm super excited, and just so that everyone knows, like, this has been, um...

Aimee and I actually met each other in 2015 at a very small, interesting poetry festival, uh, Bridgewater Poetry Festival, and then, um, I ran into her at the latest AWP in LA in the hallway, and I was like, "We gotta have be a-- You have to come on the podcast. It's so nice to see you, and I've been trying to get, you know, the way my life is chaotic, trying to get people on the podcast, and I forget, but I'm so happy you're here, and it was so amazing to run into you there at AWP."

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah, it was really great to see you and, and keep in touch somewhat [00:01:00] throughout the years too from, from all the way back then.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Uh, yeah. It, it was, you know, with poetry, I feel like there's relationships that occur, and there are these amazing, like, connections that I've made and that we make as poets, and then the work or what we do kind of sends vibrations out to like as communication, and then we communicate, and then it continues.

So the podcast has been, like, such a fun moment for me to kind of send that ti-like, send that little energy out to kinda, like, bring people in and, um, and just learn from them, and I'm so excited to kinda have you today.

**Aimee Suzara:** Yay.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Um, so why don't you tell the audience a little bit about yourself, and then we will, uh, jump right in

**Aimee Suzara:** Okay.

Well, um, like you said, I'm based in Oakland, California. I've been here for quite a long time. Um, and I'm Filipino American. I like to put all of those identifiers out there. [00:02:00] Um, writer. Uh, I, I mostly write poetry, as you mentioned. That's my first love and my first, um, genre. Playwriting and starting to dabble into screenwriting.

Um, multidisciplinary work is something I also do a lot. I work- I bring my poetry with dance theater or music. I've done a lot of collaborations at, that, I think because I do have movement practice and, and I just r- and, and musical background too, that I, I have always meshed really well with interdisciplinary theater and performance.

And I teach English, comp, creative writing, and all of that good stuff at the, uh, colleges right now, community colleges. I also have a writing coaching business I started called Wild Tongues Writing. And, um, I love to work with people. I, I think for all of my decades of teaching, it's really been my love to help open up people's voices, help them discover their voices, [00:03:00] and, um, tell their stories.

So that's also a big passion of mine.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm-hmm. I love that. And, and everything you do is just... I, I've been meeting so many different people, and this multidisciplinary, multi-hyphenate, like, existence has become much more the norm for a lot of people, and it just seems v- it's exciting. Like, do you find that it's hard to, it would be hard to stay in one thing, that you have so much going on that, uh, that you want to put out, that you need several different, in a way, modalities or spaces to do that?

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah, I think, I mean, I tend to wanna expand and try a lot of things. Um, I think I keep grounded knowing that poetry is the thing I have the m- the genre I have the most comfort with, that I could, you know, hold on to regardless of what I collaborate with. It's always at the core. Mm. But, um, but definitely I think there- I [00:04:00] love that as a writer, hybrid writing, you know, um, multi-genre, I think that that's really fun.

Um, my... The book that we're gonna talk about that's coming out has, like, a play in the middle of it and, and I think that, um, we have that possibility these days. And also, you know, the, with all the negative things around technology, we do have more opportunities where people's work is being shared in different modes, such as a podcast or something that you could tune into easily instead of waiting for a book to get published Mm.

Or waiting for a play to get produced, which takes many years, you know? So there's a lot of opportunities for our, our stories and our voices to be circulated.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm. I like that. Yeah, let's talk about that. Let's- Yeah ... I wanna talk about, like, moving from... 'Cause when we met, you had your book, uh, Souvenir, I believe was the book, and love, love it.

It's, I've actually shared some poems of that book to, uh, with a lot of my students when we talk [00:05:00] about, um, identity and creating, like, d- using different genres to provide, um, historic and analytical spaces in their writing, and they, they love it. And actually they love seeing that, like, oh, you can use poetry to teach.

It's not just about these types of like, uh, poetry's not just about my emotions. It's about emotion, though, connected to humanity, connected to teaching and-

**Aimee Suzara:** Mm ...

**Daniel Dissinger:** you know, they do, they, they really enjoy engaging your work.

**Aimee Suzara:** Um-

**Daniel Dissinger:** How, what's the move from Souvenir to your new book, like, uh-

**Aimee Suzara:** I, uh- ... Birth

**Daniel Dissinger:** Language, right?

That's your, your new book.

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah. Well, okay, so I'm actually, I, I, you're making me think I'll just show, uh, show and talk about the covers for those of people who are not looking. Um, so it's funny because both covers end up having, like, a central female image in the middle. This is Souvenir. Mm. It unfortunately went, is out of print, so I'm hopefully eventually it'll get- another publication in the future.

But this is from 2014, [00:06:00] and I had, you know, the, the cover image with permission from the Missouri Histor- History Library, the, a, a, a young woman that was, um, on display in the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri.

And, um, and you know, I really wanted to humanize and y- people that ha- her name was Tugmena, a Suyoc girl, so I also wanted to give her a name.

And you know, because in, in the exhibit, people's humanity was pretty much denied. They were put on display. They had to perform their lives and their rituals and their culture. But I also saw trends with how that relates to contemporary life, and my own journey, and many of our journeys as, like, children of immigrants, and f- figuring out who we are, finding ourselves, like, exoticized, stereotyped, seen invisible or too visible, like, all of these things.

And, um, so I, I, I think a similarity with my current book, which is not the... The book hasn't come, been published yet. If you can [00:07:00] see, there's an- also an image of, this is, uh, uh, artwork by Malaya Tuyay.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm.

**Aimee Suzara:** It's kinda, like, hard to see though, but it's, there's all these, like... I don't know, I guess I have a filter on my thing.

Um, but- I'm gonna drop an image right in there. Yeah, you'll drop the image of the cover. And M- Malaya Tuyay did this, had this beautiful art that has, you know, a, a woman's image as well, split in the middle with multiple hands, and, like, these balls of circles, and, and, like, it looks like she's doing spells and incantations.

Anyway, so there's this also wanting to centralize, um, someone who to me also felt representative of a pre-colonial indigenous or maybe timeless woman, right? And my, this book also digs into history and archives, um, but goes into, like, as early as the 1500s, 1600s, early documents, um, where Spanish and European colonizers were visiting the [00:08:00] Philippines and other islands at that time, um, during the Spanish Empire, and, and encounters and, and kind of im- trying to help imagine voices of people who were native or indigenous people living in the islands.

So a similar thing where I'm, like, speaking in the "I" and kind of giving persona to using an imagination, using language as time travel, which is something I say. This book is trilingual. Um, it's not, not all of them are trilingual, but it's enough that you're going to find yourself switching and m- m- finding mixtures of English primarily, um, Spanish, and Tagalog.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm.

**Aimee Suzara:** Um, and I think there might be even one little passage that has some Ilokano in it. But, um, and using also similar to my other book- Um, archival texts, you know, like old s- for primary sources like documents and using those as jumping off points or [00:09:00] integrating them into the work. So there's multiple voices.

Also, I feel like I'm similarly kind of... In this book you're gonna be all different time frames all the way up to contemporary times. Oh, wow. Um, yeah.

**Daniel Dissinger:** I love that. Oh, I can't wait. Do you- Ooh. So when you do that type of research, right? When- or you provide that type of, um, and you dive into those types of archives, how do you...

Well, what, what how do you prepare for such a work like that? Because that is a lot. I mean, as, as someone who does somewhat that type of a little bit research in my work and now thinking about going into, you know, working with an archive soon, um, what is it like to, to dive into those types of archival works?

But also, like, I think it's interesting too because you know how, how research is skewed within, like, the colonial lens and, and the colonizer and how that gets rewritten, how history gets rewritten. How do you navigate these [00:10:00] types of things?

**Aimee Suzara:** Um, yeah, I mean, I think you're, you're onto it where I think that's a passion for me in writing and teaching, uh, and making art, is that it is about, um, flipping the gaze, like the colonial gaze or the, the oppressive gaze, and, like, trying to...

Not trying to, but, like, coming from a perspective of agency and e- you know, since we couldn't fi- you can't find documents with, with, like, the native Filipinos talking about themselves in either of those periods of the 19- of the 1900s and the 1600s, that, you know, you, the, the power of imagining, you know.

Um, but imagining with a, with a compassionate lens that acknowledges that the power dynamics in the way that documentation has happened and the way history has been recorded, right? So if we're, like, talking through the [00:11:00] reading documents from Spanish, even the most compassionate or most e- c- I don't wanna say neutral 'cause there is no neutral objective, but observations, like there's, you know, documents.

There's still, you're gonna see, you know, the native folks are seen as beautiful, and flowing hair, and naked, and savage. Like, i- uh, all of these terms, like they might be even positive, but they're still- Mm ... you know, not fully complex, right? And, um, and so I think the power of being a writer and a storyteller is to be able to, to at least challenge.

We can't a- actually know how people thought and felt, but we can imagine, and we can, um, you know, offer alternate ways of seeing those histo- historic moments. Uh, so I think that that's, it's a challenge, but it's also, um, one of the driving forces, which I think you've probably experienced. When you d- when you go into history, you, you can, you question it, you query it.

You don't just say, "Oh, this [00:12:00] is how it is." 'Cause we all know, I mean, even growing up in my own life, seeing... You know, I was raised in, um, I write a little bit in both of those books about, like, growing up in small towns in the Pacific Northwest and living in different environments where I was very much a, I felt like a minority, right?

But I would, I felt like I was probably taught the most, quote-unquote, "American", US American versions of things.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm.

**Aimee Suzara:** You know? Um, when I was in Pacific Northwest, it was a lot about Lewis and Clark, and Sacagawea, and this whole narrative of, like, the, these heroic, you know, people who are mapping and discovering.

Yeah. You know? So I also feel like flipping those and s- and, and knowing that there's a lot that's we don't get taught, that's not in the books, that we can, as writers, can try to help flesh out.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Yeah, you know, like, say, when you're saying that, I'm remembering when, um, [00:13:00] after we met and I was reading your book and thinking about, um, thinking about the World's Fair because I'm from New York.

So in Queens, you have where they had the World's Fair in Queens. And for us, like, you know, when you're growing up, like, "Oh, this is when the World's Fair was," and the World's Fair was this amazing thing and this thing, and then, 'cause you get that part from where you're getting the oral narrative, right?

Yeah. Whether it's your parents or it's a school or it's, you know, the people that make the placards for, like, you know the things and the- Yeah ... for those places. And it's like when you pro- when you hear the other sides of these stories, you're just like, there are other sides. And I think it's in, it, a lot of people nowadays especially, there's like this fear of truth and a fear of learning the f- a full history, thinking about, like, a full history having to lay blame.

But it's like, no, [00:14:00] knowledge is not blame. Knowledge is knowledge. Mm-hmm. And I just wanna thank you 'cause that book does that. Like, it provides other stor- it provides the dimensions that are, like, at least another side that is missing. But do you feel like, especially now as you're writing, especially, um, as a poet now and a playwright and an educator, that there's a role that you feel you, um, I don't wanna say that it's your responsibility, but that you're called to, and sometimes when you get to the creative space, that you're just like, "There are gaps I wanna fill or stories that need to be told, and I can do that"?

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah. Um, I mean, I think- When I think about Birth Language, it go- it does spend a lot of time in history, uh, but then it does also have, you know, a, a voice or character that is the I that is pr- pretty unmistakably me, you know? That's, uh... But I, I, I, I found that the lens of [00:15:00] myth, mythology, um, and as, like, putting another perspective and lens where, um, I as...

Like, there's one poem where it's like I saw myself as a kapre, which is, like, a type of mythological creature that my parents, my dad grew up with- Mm-hmm ... that was, like, this monstrous creature that lived in a tree, right? But then I w- looking at myself visiting the Philippines, I m- I likened myself to a creature like that because I felt so lumbering and big and out of place and kind of like this outsider that's...

But also insider at the same time. So I found that was a, a, a fun and interesting way to, to dig into my own, to learn about folklore and mythology in my own ancestry, you know? Because I also didn't necessarily grow up with a lot of those stories, so a lot of it's like let, let me dig in more. So even in my own, it, it, it challenges me to look at my [00:16:00] own stories and to, to ask my parents questions, for example.

Um, and the other thing is, um, yeah, I feel like there's an opportunity to, to learn about yourself when you're doing this research. You know, to, it's, it, and to learn language. Like, so for me, Birth Language, being trilingual, um, I like

to think of... There's, there are poems where the speaker, who is, like, me, is is, uh, learning languages, right?

And is struggling to learn because it's been for various reasons robbed from us or that wasn't passed along, right? So to embrace and to have readers feel like, okay, so many of us, especially Filipino Americans, d- don't speak fluent Tagalog or the other languages our parents spoke. Most of our parents spoke at least two or three or four languages, right?

And then we ended up with just English. So [00:17:00] learning it and writing in it is challenging and uncomfortable and awkward. Mm-hmm. But how can we, how could I put that in the book and be like, "This is challenging and awkward and broken and, and a learning process," right? And that's part of... The book is also organized as sort of a ceremony, so it has, um- You know, invocations and exorcisms.

Um, there's- it opens with, like, a prayer from a babaylan, like a shaman who's, who's kind of, who's kind of beginning and end, you know, containing this, the whole thing. So I feel like there's a process that for, for me as a writer and hopefully for the reader, there's this process of, like, going through different phases of self-knowledge and confronting different aspects of ourselves and our histories.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm. Wow. Okay. There's so, [00:18:00] there's so much there. And you know, it's like, and, and it is something, there are things there too. It's funny, um, something that I've been, when I interview people, uh, or interview, when we have conversations and especially with the talks of language, I'm, I'm always like m- the fam- my, uh, the Italian side of my family, even the German side of my family, they all decided we're never taught, we're, we're not talking, uh, we're not teaching this to our children.

Mm-hmm. So then that language never got passed down, right? And a lot of the things that's interesting, especially with the privilege of being white and male in America, you never think of, like, what you're missing. Mm-hmm. And then all of a sudden you move past that and you go, "Oh, whiteness did this." Mm. The choice of whiteness in America then took, th- they made that choice into whiteness to erase their language.

Mm-hmm. Like my ancestors, Sicilians, Italians, and Germans, and in all sense, like, I have no connection. And, and [00:19:00] it's just like I'm on a journey to figure that out, and it's interesting how language does that. Mm-hmm. My

partner's Greek, so they have that connection, the language connection, and it's like, wow, like if I had that.

So it's interesting too to have a- Mm ... trilingual text too, and working through languages that you don't necessarily, or you, you're almost like reconnecting or re- in a way, re-stitching into- Mm ... kind of your life. And i- am leading towards a question here about, like, that because you're also as an educator, like when you are in the classroom and students are writing, do you, uh, open the space up for multilingual text for, for, for your students, uh, at times?

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah, um, so when I teach cr- literature or creative writing, I do like to use works that incorporate, have multilingual, um, features. And the- and, like, um, I like to talk about remixing, like history in the past. You know, coming from [00:20:00] my generation growing up in the '80s, I like to talk about mixtapes and remixes and thinking of yourself as a DJ, like, or, or, like, there's different metaphors depending on the setting.

I, I also, like, love libraries, so I also like thinking about archives physically guiding them to think of... Well, when I was in college, my first job, one of my first jobs was to work in the library. Mm. The, the, the bottom, the stacks at UC Berkeley in, like, the dungeon, you know, carting around and, like, sorting.

And I felt like that physical Um, experience of discovering texts and information was so, is so different than what people have now. But I think that shows up in my writing because I love encountering things, right? And, and I try to get my students to do that too, so I have them, um, you know, I, I encourage them to go to real libraries, but also, you know, we might take things out of a paper and turn to a page and, like, borrow words from the books we're [00:21:00] reading.

Um, and then they, they've used some of my work as well- Mm-hmm ... um, and seem to be drawn to, uh, the use of the folklore and the, and the language.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm. So folklore, uh, it's, in birth, in birth language, folklore plays a huge role. Like, do you feel that people misunderstand, like, sometimes about the, the, the ideas of what folklore and mythology are, are in terms of, like, how it's treated?

Because sometimes-

**Aimee Suzara:** Hmm ...

**Daniel Dissinger:** when I, I took, we went to, I did a four-week trip with my students to Greece. And they, um... And we were talking about Greek mythology with the, with the tour guides, and then all of a sudden we started to realize that they were like, "Look, at what you know as mythology was the way of, was our, um, was our, uh, spirit- was a spiritual practice.

These were practices." Right. "This was our religious practice," right?

**Aimee Suzara:** Hmm.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Um, do you feel there's, like, sometimes [00:22:00] this mis- th- there's this misstep or misunderstanding or erasure that, like, makes something, not makes it mythology, but makes it mythic, I guess, or folklore? Mm-hmm. Do you... I don't know if I'm making myself clear, like

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah.

No, it makes sense. And actually I'm, like, looking at the table of contents in my book and thinking, "Where does folk- what is folklore in there?" Part of it is going back to... 'Cause we could say folklore and mythology. Actually, when I teach I like to say, like, talk about my- myths. Like m- Mm ... mythology. We talk about, like, what are, what do we think of as mythology?

Well, stories that people tell to try to explain how things came to be or how things are. And they, but then you start thinking, "Well, we are always making up s-" we can say urban legends or myths or ways to expl- you know. So I think that's the creation of folklore too, right? So it's something that we might inherit, and then there's also ones that we, we make up along the way.

And so what I did in some of my pieces is, um, there's a section called Encantos, a chapter that's [00:23:00] about, that's a, a lot around, um, based on c- creatures and including, like, sirenos and sirenas, like, um, mermaids. But it's based, but it's, like, taking real things that have happened in my history and ancestry and then, like- Retelling it as though a character was, uh, is from this story, this mythology, or this is a Sireno or is a, um, capre, like I said.

Um, there's like a couple of them where it's based on these... I, I was digging into, um, texts where there were, you know, little stories and parables about characters, the boy who was split in two, the boy who became a stone. Mm-hmm. And then there's this whole thing of, um, I encountered, um, my father in my, in real life, my father's family owned movie theaters, and he always talked

about how there's a movie, um, that's about a [00:24:00] Sireno or like a Sirena, a, a mermaid that's called Jezebel.

And so I started digging into that. So it was like how, how personal history started meeting these like mythological characters I was interested in. And so a lot of it's about water creatures too, right? Like, like being out of, being from island nations and then having to live on land. You know, having to live in the desert.

For me, I had to live in the desert for some time. So there's this sort of like outsider-ness of people who were historically all the way to the beginning of the book where I'm going back to those early 1600s f- um, times of like people who were described as being amazing swimmers and boat, could use boats and were water beings, right?

So it's like, in a way, we, I kind of found this origin story was a thread that we're water beings, right? We're like amphibious. We can breathe underwater. We could swim in this excellent way [00:25:00] all the f- way through, all of us, including me. You know, including us in the future, my child in the future. And then the other thing I started looking at was like the, the section called Pagluwad, which is about birthing, is like a lot of myth- they're called beliefs from this, um, collection of beliefs around day-to-day life.

So I would say those are really like folklore in that they're almost like folk beliefs, right? Like, if you do this, this will happen. So there's one, for example, if the umbilical cord is twisted at birth, the child becomes brave, right? If you, if you don't ask for permission when you're bathing in springs and rivers, this will happen, right?

It's like dealing with spirits, but also like beliefs around the body and what different things mean. So for birthing, um, I found a lot of interesting ones about, about birthing, and so I s- I started to like kind of transpose those on, on, um, my experience as, [00:26:00] of b- giving birth.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm-hmm. Ca- can you ex- say more about that?

Yeah. 'Cause like I'm, I'm, I'm obsessed with how it, it, there's such a There's such an interest, uh, such a, a, hmmm, I don't even know what I'm saying, like, a deep connection that you're dev- like, creating. And I l- I don't know, like, I'm, I'm loving this. Like- Uh-huh ... there's, like, a pull all the way from one, one moment in time or this other being all the way through to the future.

Like, can-- I'd like, yeah, like, and then the idea of birthing, that is so... I have a friend who writes about this as well. Um, I'm, I'm hoping I get her name right. Sarah Nolan. She's on Substack. She does some really great, uh, posts about, uh, being a mother and birthing as well. And the, the idea too about birth and how you're talking about it, and then the idea of birth language, like, there's, like, such a, [00:27:00] not even just the speaking part, but the, like, in the passing of a story through the body, like, from one body through the body.

But yeah- Yeah. Mm-hmm ... it can, I would love to hear more. Yeah. Yeah.

**Aimee Suzara:** I'm almost wondering if I should find a poem-

**Daniel Dissinger:** Sure ...

**Aimee Suzara:** that might actually explain without talking about it, but I'm trying to find one, um, that's- I could start with one that's pretty short, and then there's one that really does the folklore. So I, I don't know if the length will be...

I don't know, that's not that bad. It's like two pa- you know, two pages of poetry. You could do

**Daniel Dissinger:** it, two- that's no problem.

**Aimee Suzara:** Okay. I- Okay.

**Daniel Dissinger:** This is a, this is a podcast that loves- Yeah ... to listen.

**Aimee Suzara:** So. It loves to listen. Okay.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Absolutely.

**Aimee Suzara:** So I'll give some examples since we're talking about the birthing ones, which I haven't actually read a ton of these in a while.

But, um, one that I've been reading a lot, um, is called First Ultrasound of a Trickster, and it's a, uh... I'll just go into it [00:28:00] and then, you know, can kind of see there's tiny bits of language things in here. Uh, First Ultrasound of a Trickster. "What did you sound like that first time? A flutter, the wings of a furious butterfly, thrum of a colibri.

Twice my heart's speed yours. A life force undeniable. A wild new fish already swimming upstream. All swashbuckle and verve, all grit and ashé. Already my Santo Niño playing in my waters, opening the way." So, like, this one in terms of, like, Santo N- it has, like, some words from, like, Spanish, but also Santo Niño is, like, a syncretized, it's like a Santo Niño in other places, including Cuba and, you know, places that I was, like, writing some of this work.

And my son is also, like, Cuban and Filipino. And so I was like, he's like the Santo Niño who's [00:29:00] a... They're in both the, in, in multiple traditions, it's like there's a child version that's, like, in the path of Elegua, like, it's like the trickster that opens the way. Mm-hmm. And in the Filipino version, he's like a child that plays in the water and is supposed to bring good fortune if you, like, go put the s- the, the statue in the w- there's, like, places where they put the statue in the water.

They bathe the statue. Mm-hmm. And so, um, the way that saints are in the Philippines are is very, like, tangible. Like, the icons, like how they treat the, the statues and all that. And that actually hearkens to earlier in the book that I challenge them stories around Ferdinand Magellan, or, uh, I, I write some stories about Ferdinand Magellan, how, um, one of the things that was presented to the native people, particularly, um, uh- H- Hara Humama- [00:30:00] Humamae.

I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing it very well, but, uh, Hara Humamae was, like, the queen of this, um, tribe- tribe. They presented the Santo Niño, which is, like, this childlike statue, right? That was in Europe and different places was, was... So this character kind of travels throughout the whole book of the Santo Niño, Santo Niño, to kinda see how the different versions of this deity.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm-hmm.

**Aimee Suzara:** Um, and in the early one, I- I'm kind of trying to show the stories of how Ferdinand Magellan, who's been celebrated as the pers- the person who circumvent, uh, uh, who, uh, circum- circumnavigated the glo- the globe- Yeah ... which he actually didn't. Mm-hmm. I, I mean, I think people now know, but there was, like, um, when he had his 5- there was, like, a 500-year anniversary.

People still idolize Ferdinand Magellan. Mm-hmm. But the truth is he was n-known to be not a great person, and was, um, you [00:31:00] know, was actually killed when, by, by the tribe of Lapu-Lapu, which was, like, a, a, a

tribal leader in, um, the Philippines. So the storyline got changed where they d- he actually didn't make it all around the globe.

He, he, he lost, you know? He didn't make it back. And the, there was, um, Lapu-Lapu refused to, you know, give in to the Spanish. And they, and through religion, they, there was this sort of, like, "We're going to see... Yes, we're gonna be Christianized," but then they were still celebrating their own gods and goddesses.

So it's questionable, like, were they really giving it up, or were they integrating, or were they, you know? So, um, yeah. So then back to the birthing, um, I guess one more on the birth section that illustrates what we're talking about is this one goes into a character that's called the- Uh, manananggal, that's a type of [00:32:00] monstrous character that was known to, uh, m- almost like a night creature that would suck the babies out of pregnant baby, pregnant women's bellies.

So like this is like, it- there's a whole politics around this vis- there, it's called a viscera sucker also, um, because it's, it's believed by many scholars that it was exaggerated as a negative female figure to demonize women- Mm ... sort of like to, right? Because why would, you know, there's this feminine character that's going and killing baby, you know, taking out fetuses.

So what I did was, I, this poem, I'll just read the poem because I'm gonna just talk and talk about it. It's called, it, it's... And this is one that I've actually had my students grapple with and they, they seem to like it. I mean, it's... So Birthing Woman as Viscera Suc- Sucker, and I, I inco- incorporate with permission Herminia Menezes wrote [00:33:00] a, a, an essay called The Viscera Sucker and the Politics of Gender, and so I incorporate it without the poem, throughout the poem.

So when you see it on the page, it's really more, it's kind of a visual poem. It has a lot of italic- uh, it has a lot of use of this other voice inside the text. Um, so let me just try to read it. In preparation for his arrival, I made my den. Candles, bergamot doused humidifier, coconut water, contraction timer.

By day, the viscera sucker appears an exceptionally attractive woman with long hair, fuller and richer from the hormones that infuse my body. The creature clung to sac, placenta, umbilical cord. By night, she discards her lower torso, hiding it under the sheets in a closet or among a patch of banana trees.

Day 11 after due date, the helot who evicted overstaying children speared needles and enerhiya into my shoulders, initiating his departure. Another [00:34:00] helot swept membranes, commenced a stirring. Triad of healers prepared massage. Looped a malong to stretch my back, sang songs to dance the child down.

Sprinkling holy water, burning incense. Contractions were violent, bursting from the inside. Displaying blessed palms. Doula did not arrive. The crucifix and praying are believed to paralyze a witch. Blood pooled out of me, maxi pad soaked in red. To capture a viscera sucker, "Go," I emitted. One should cast a priest's cincture or belt around her body to make her, at the hospital, a hospital I arrived, powerless.

A tortured, writhing beast, doctors and nurses in gowns and gloves probed, connected, draped, monitored, injected. A hand, my hand, signed papers shoved at it. Papers [00:35:00] quivered off the narrow bed like leaves blown by a supernatural wind. Birth plans, prayers, blueprints abandoned. They wringed their hands and wheeled me into the fluorescent chamber.

If someone rubs ashes, salt, vinegar, lemon juice, garlic, ginger, pepper, and other spices on her discarded part, reattachment is impossible. Sliced in two, I parted for his removal, and the viscera sucker dies fragmented So there's that. Wow. I- It's hard to know how that goes without looking at all... This is one, so I do like to do, I mean, I, I consider myself a performing poet, which w- when we met, I, that was that sort of...

But this is one that I'm like, "I want people to see it." So when you get it, you'll see-

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm ...

**Aimee Suzara:** there are certain, like, uh, placement and pauses that are created by the visual structure. But also, I was trying to read, I was like looking over here when I would read Herminia Manes's-

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm ...

**Aimee Suzara:** [00:36:00] words.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm.

**Aimee Suzara:** So in some ways it might be interesting to have, like, another voice, like two people s- you know, reading.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Yes. That, like, that poem, it give me, gave me chills. Like, I was lis- it, it was so, like, and I think maybe because I, of being a poet and reading and, like, I can almost, like, visually see kind of with the pauses and w- where things might be placed. Mm. But the way you, the way you move the reader from one space into the next, like, this almost feeling a little more home, and then under f- when I hear fluorescent lights, it just, like, immediately, like, my brain's just, like, cold.

Mm. Everything's cold. Mm. Everything's cold, everything's sterile, and everything's kind of also horrifying. I don't know. Mm. There's something horrifying to me o- of a fluorescent light. I don't like it. Mm-hmm. You know? Um, but it's just, that's such a, [00:37:00] oh, such a beautiful poem. And you really take the, you, I don't know.

The, the violence is gorgeous in a way, almost, the way you do it. Like-

This is the ti- this is the time in the, in the podcast every time a poet reads a poem, I'm like, "Whatever I'm gonna say is gonna sound so ridiculous." Oh. Because you're, you're hit with the words and you're just like, I'm like, my job as the host is to attempt to, like, respond, but there's no real response except for the confusion because it hits you like that.

Like, it's really great. Mm. That was beautiful. That was amazing.

**Aimee Suzara:** Oh, thank you.

**Daniel Dissinger:** How do you mix, like, when you mix the two spaces, right? When you mix almost, like, the, the, the folklore with the, I don't wanna say, like, I'm not s- with, with the folklore, with the kind of, um, non-folkloric space, I guess, when you mix- Yeah

the two worlds, like- Mm ... what is, what are you at- [00:38:00] attempting, you feel like? Like, what is the attempt to, to mix the two worlds together? Like, how, what do you want the reader maybe to take from that?

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah, I, so I'm looking at this poem now thinking about our conversation and thinking about how voices speak, voices speak to each other, um, across time.

E- even though this essay was a contemporary essay, it was, like, revisiting these beliefs that have been around for a long time. I think what happens is I'm tr- you know, a lot of... These poems are not... Most of this book is not, does not sound like a personal autobiographical s- poem, like, narrative. But whenever there's I, a lot of times it is based on my personal experience.

So I guess if someone interviewed me, "What inspired this poem?" I would definitely say, you know, I had a C-section. Right. But it's like the giving birth is such a supernatural thing anyway. It's so clinical, and it's also supernatural at the same time.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Yeah.

**Aimee Suzara:** No [00:39:00] matter what way you, one gives birth, right, is, like, near-death experience.

And, and it's like, what is happening to me, right? There's, regardless of, you know. But I think especially with a C-section because it's, it's, it, it switches from the... Like, in the poem, there's a place where it's like there was a plan- Mm ... and all these things get, like, ernt, like, sideswiped. But it becomes felt violent in some ways.

But at the same time, it felt... It's like how you just said, beauty and violence, how are they happening? But the, the outcome of this child, right? There is a death of something. And so I think I was trying to... I've been... It was a, I... All of us who have, many of us who've given birth were like, "Write your birth story."

And I think writing it through these poems was actually more touched on it in a different and better way than just writing journaling.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm-hmm.

**Aimee Suzara:** Because it's touching on some things I can't quite explain in a s- plain language. [00:40:00] And so something about the viscer- viscer sucker and the mananangga, like, how horribly s- violent the idea that this character would go and f- beau...

So the character's, like, supposed to be this beautiful woman who's like... And, and I write about her in several of these actually birth. Yeah. There's s- I think I rhyme... Men- she's mentioned in more than one place. But it's like this, like,

this fact is, is this character would go and through a tube-like, um, tongue would, like, take out the fetus, right?

So but, you know, I was thinking there's something about being the C-section that felt like I was looking at myself split in half, right? Yeah. So I think it's like, how do you talk about this? You're, like, looking at half of you. You don't feel anything but through this curtain, and you see these things happening to you, right?

**Daniel Dissinger:** Yeah.

**Aimee Suzara:** And so there is a sort of, um, detachment from yourself that happens. So again, I [00:41:00] can't lo- Maybe one day I could explain even better, but it just felt like it helped me place, uh, it just- encountering, putting this story together with the other story just helped me make some sense of the experience.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Yeah.

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah. But also I think, um, when people... And it's interesting when I have my students read this, and they're like, "Wow, I didn't know how birth was." Like, I was like, "You- wow," I was like surprised that you took that away from this or whatever that you understood it, 'cause it feels so esoteric to me. But, um, you know, I guess there's the plain language of the narrative, right?

The blood is pooling. There's like a maxi pad. Like, there's just, like, things that are very, like, mundane happening that I guess even if they're not familiar with the mythology, which is I think I do this in other poems too, where it's like, okay, it's a question of how much translation and explanation do you need to do?

Sure, yeah. That's a good question for anybody writing it, uh, 'cause I think when you're using archival [00:42:00] text and mythology and, and other belief systems, you're... It's similar to using other languages too, because there's a whole everything that is carrying entire b- ways of thinking and seeing with it. Mm. So then do you have to explain every single thing?

I'm always playing with that, and I tell my students, actually, now I'm much more of a f- and my, and my clients too, let's go towards, you know, I don't have to translate everything. You know, you're gonna figure it out. I'll give... I do like

end notes. I'm, I like ner- I'm nerdy about it. I want people- Yeah. I do, I don't want people to go so far astray that they just...

There will be people who won't go and look it up, right? And then I also don't want people to necessarily have to go to Google, 'cause I'm like, uh, you know. yeah. So I do- 'cause then you're gonna find all kinds of AI stuff, right? Okay. Uh-huh. I said the AI word. But, um- But yeah, I mean, I like end notes 'cause I li- I would like to read people's end notes.

I like, you know... So hopefully people will learn simultaneously about [00:43:00] a narrative that is personal, but also I'm not the only one that's gone through the experience. And then simultaneously look up and learn about what this viscer sucker character is.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm. Yeah, you, you know, I, I, I'm, m- I have students who wanna write.

When they, when they write they, they kinda wanna include things that they feel like, well, what if the audience doesn't notice? Like, what if the reader doesn't speak this other language or do this other thing? Do I need to, um- Do I need to translate everything? And-

**Aimee Suzara:** Mm, reference actually ...

**Daniel Dissinger:** sometimes I'm like, well, you choose what you feel like you'd like to translate, and if not everyone gets everything, then, you know, not everyone gets everything.

And, you know, you could ch- make these choices, you know, 'cause some people, some writers want to be like, "Look, it's up to the audience," or maybe they're not included, right? Like, there's- it's all, like, very author, um, [00:44:00] au- there's a lot of author choice. The, the other thing that's interesting as I was listening to your, to you read that poem, immediately I started thinking of the, um, artist, um, Ana Mendieta, who did these amazing things, uh- She has a series, she had a series called the Silueta series.

And so what she did was she would make this, like, form in the ground or on walls or find them in nature, and they kinda looked... They're, they're not specifically, like, the female form, but, like, that's how she kind of, like, looked at it. And it's not like a form coming out or going, or going into the earth.

It was almost like this, it was almost looked like a portal. Mm-hmm. And a l- and it was, and she sometimes did it with blood. She was a, um, she, um, oh, uh, what is the... Uh, she was a, a practitioner of Santeria, so it's like she, a lot of it was that. She was an amazing performance artist. [00:45:00] And I just kept thinking, I'm like, the way you're talking about this also, there's like, there's almost like portal, a portal being created in this room, right?

From the body. And the way it's being described, I'm like, it, it just, like, brought me there. 'Cause I also had, like, the poet Bhanu Kapil, who kind of, like, introduced me to Ana Mendieta and introduced me to- Mm-hmm ... and her work was, is also a lot of, I mean, the, the, I mean, a amazing, amazing writer. Um, but yeah, just ke- I just kept thinking of this.

I'm just like, it's so much that because she would draw these, like, almost blood portals on walls and things. Oh. And she was unbelievable artist. So I'm thinking, I'm like, "Wow, the body creates so much, um, of an entry and an exit." I- and in, and in, and specifically in terms of birthing as well and, and... And then I thought, I'm sorry I keep going, because your poem just like- Yeah

started [00:46:00] triggering so many things. Like, and then I'm remembering the first time I read a story about a woman giving birth in, in a real, like a, a, an account that like, I was like, "Whoa, okay. I knew, I know nothing." And I kn- I still know nothing, obviously. But it's like, uh, I remember reading it from The Vagina Monologues, and reading it, I'd be like, "Holy shit."

I was like, "Okay. New knowledge, and now I need to like," you know. It just was, like, the most humbling narrative I read.

**Aimee Suzara:** Hmm.

**Daniel Dissinger:** And it's re- I feel like, and I've taught that book to my students sever- uh, in, for several years, um, and n- and that book really, like, floored a lot of them, and they were like, "Okay." And then the women in the, in the class were like Thank you.

And they also were like, "We're reading it with my softball team." And I'm like, "I'm glad. That's great." Awesome. But like, you- when you read these things and especially when the body, when the [00:47:00] body you encompass, like me, is never going to have this experience- Mm-hmm ... and not have the, the specifically the violence that you're discussing, it is a very humbling moment to kind of like listen to, and I feel...

And I thank you for, for sharing that poem. Mm-hmm. I'm glad that you did. Yeah. That's really great.

**Aimee Suzara:** I do wanna say something. Thank you for sharing all of those references, too, um, and your experience teaching. It's really great to, that you're, the material you're bringing. Um, I do wanna say there's an interesting thing.

When I said the word violence, but then I also feel like, um, one of the things I was grappling with during the birthing process was the process from going through what I... And I'm speaking in a literal way, but I think there's a way, a layer here that comes out in the poetry, is Sometimes we feel, okay, we go to a hospital, the fluorescent lights and all that, and now we're at the mercy of this, like, this institution, right?

But at the same time, there was a part of me [00:48:00] that saw I was giving birth to my child. You know, he came out. You know, it was like, it's beautiful. Yeah. And if it was the attitude was not... If I didn't have this attitude that this is now, I'm not doing it the way I was supposed to, now I'm about to have a C-section.

A lot of women have shame around- Mm ... "I didn't, I failed. I had to get a C-section." It's like even it's not your fault, right? But, you know, there's a way that we, we all wanted to do it, this natural birth or whatever. But I think that the narrative around... It's like, it's still also a beautiful birth. Um, there's like...

I've got, I got really interested after birthing in, like, all these, like, blog, uh, uh, Instagram things around birthing and, and, like, how we portray any kind of birth. It's like, yeah, the person goes through a near-death experience, and the, and the, this experience of the mother needs all the various ways that it needs to be known.

And, um, how can we make... still see it as a sacred [00:49:00] experience even if you're in a hospital? Like, how can we... So I think there's something here about, about bringing in these, th- this character that perhaps the, the viscera sucker used to, wasn't always this malicious character, right? Mm-hmm. And, and so there's a way that how can we look at, how can we reconcile what is, feels like a, a negatively cast experience and see the other sides of it?

I don't know if that explains it very well. But, um, yeah, it's basically like, you know, the complexity. If someone might feel neither that it's happy or sad, like it's, it's something else. It's like it's all of it.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm-hmm.

**Aimee Suzara:** I feel like birthing is one of those things that's like both bloody and disgusting and technical and clinical and, and it's frightening, and also like, whoa, it's like the most spiritual thing ever.

You know? And, and every person in the room starts feeling like they're like an angel or a symbol or a healer or a... [00:50:00] Right? Like even, even, you know, and I think that, um, reconciling and knowing that that's all happening.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Yeah. Yeah. No, um, thank you. Absolutely. I think sometimes we, especially nowadays, like as, you know, with so much, uh- With our ability to hear and see so many other narratives that people feel that sort of like shame as to like, "Oh, I wasn't able to do X, Y, and Z.

Here's like- Mm-hmm ... 100 stories that came in that's were able to do that." And, and I think like that's a very im- that's important for people to hear because I think it's something that we are r- definitely grapple with, um- Mm ... as human beings now with so many people able to kinda just share everything all the time, and everyone taking in so much all the time.

And-

**Aimee Suzara:** Yes ...

**Daniel Dissinger:** it's, it's, uh, really good to kinda... And also like with books, like the meditative part of like [00:51:00] being able to sit with a book without the distraction of everything else coming in. Right,

**Aimee Suzara:** right, right. And

**Daniel Dissinger:** that's really, you know, a beautiful moment. Yeah.

**Aimee Suzara:** I think I wanna go back to what you said, which is one of my, my inspirations both as a writer and as an educator, is the body.

You know, returning to the body. I think that's one way we can also take ourselves away from all of this like- Overstimulation, right, is the body. Like center back in the body and how does that feel? And I, and one of the things I, I, I think since we somehow got on the track through our conversation- ... onto the, onto the mothering and birthing section- Yeah

of, of my book, which I haven't... Actually, this is good 'cause I haven't talked about it as much, is, um, I recently h- was d- I do teach mothering workshops, also teach, uh... And my passion for it is, you know, I like to use the inspiration of, of the book called Revolutionary Mothering. And, um, you know, there's authors like Angela Garbes, who do write about birthing, I mean, the [00:52:00] labor of mothering that isn't only...

Since, you know, talking across identities here, it's not just the work of the women who give birth. Like mothering is something that, that is a role that people do in society- Mm-hmm ... that's often underappreciated and invisibilized. But you pr- you might do mothering work as a teacher, right? Um, people who do healthcare, nurses and doctors are doing mothering work all the time.

But, uh, um, people who are aunties, aunties and, and, you know, adopted, adopted grandmas or whatever, you know, are doing mothering work. So I think that what, what I like to... I actually just taught a mothering workshop, and none of the people in there were literal mothering mothers. Like they came to the workshop though.

So I said, "Okay, we're still gonna talk about mothering, so we're gonna look at the work- the act- the radical acts of care," which is something coming from the Revolutionary Mothering book, and how that is something that we need to honor in ourselves and in our communities because [00:53:00] mothering role, the mothering work is what helps create the next generation that can be resistant of resistance, of radical thinking, right?

We need to ca- we need to remember the care aspect. Mm-hmm. So I think that I'm just speaking across like how can we also see these, this paying attention to the experiences of people who... Birth is one of the parts of mothering, right? It's not the only, um, as something that maybe everyone can find an entry point to, whether they're learning something.

Like you said, "Oh, my gosh, I'm learning new things," to reflecting on like what aspects of this do I actually carry as well or can I carry?

**Daniel Dissinger:** You know, you- that's so I'm thinking of how, you know, we i- in bell hooks when she talks about, um, in All About Love, like, you know, looking at it as an act. Like, you know, we go...

And, and bell hooks was always about, like, [00:54:00] in Teaching to Transgress, about, like, you got the theory and then you move into action, right?

Mm-hmm. And, and it takes the... It, it kind of, it does, it, it provides a, um, a moment for everyone to go, "Oh, so it's an action." So, like, I'm doing this thing instead of I am something, or, like, with love, like I fall into it or it just happens to me.

Like- Mm. It's a- ... it's an act, it's a, or as Eric Fromm, like, it's an art. Like, you, you practice this. You, you do it in a daily way. There are different practices of how to, and it's almost... It, it's interesting how you say that. Like, mothering becoming an action and, like, becoming a practice where people can take it on, where it needs maybe also, like, it needs to be where there's a gap in it and someone can fill it with, with ki- fill that gap, and that, that's really powerful.

That, that's- Mm-hmm ... a really powerful thing to think about. Thank you, yeah.

**Aimee Suzara:** And I think also going, that also, you know, taking it away from just gendered ideas of [00:55:00] what mothers, who mothers are- Mm-hmm ... right, is like, um, you know, looking through the queer lens and looking at, you know, also what, what would happen if everyone took more parts of mothering of all genders, right?

It wouldn't fa- ... A lot of what, what we talk a lot about invisible labor of, you know, especially in a, in a s- in the framework of heteronormative women as mothers, right? That it, that when, until we can, like, actually visibilize everything and see that actually we all have parts of this work, then the burden continues to fall on certain people, right?

Mm-hmm. So I think, you know, my, my, my going back to the poems in the book, like, a lot of this is about birthing, but there's also, like, um- Yeah, I guess it's just to, like you're saying, to think of things in a different way and introducing... There's other mythologies here, like that people believe how did a child [00:56:00] turn out to be naughty is because, you know, when the cord was wrapped around their neck.

You know, it's like, you know, just different ways to, um- to- to imagine how people, how we turn out, right, as people. Um, maybe we can extend that to thinking of- of intergenerational qualities that, you know, come along. In this case, it, I- I attach to certain myths and folklores, but you know, we can think about that as well.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Wow. Thank you. That-

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah ...

**Daniel Dissinger:** this is so great.

**Aimee Suzara:** I- Got deep. It got real deep, huh? I was like, h- are we even talking about poetry anymore? I've like, that's why I keep, I keep looking at my manuscript like- ... are we talking about poetry? What are we talking about? No.

**Daniel Dissinger:** No, I, but that's why I love that. Like, I, um, but and I feel like, ugh, like I feel like w- w- we could continue, but I want- Yeah

to make sure that- Yeah ... tell people where they can find you, where they can, um, uh, when your book's coming out too- Yeah ... because I would like to, you know, make sure that that, [00:57:00] um, that people get this, uh, when it's- when it's available and everything.

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah, yeah. Um, so- The, the book is officially, yeah, if you, uh, you can either screenshot the, or share the, the flyer or the, the...

You can look it up on my website too. So let's just put [www.aimeesuzara.net](http://www.aimeesuzara.net), A-I-M-E-E, S as in Sam, U-Z-A-R-A.net. And then there's a page that you can find Birth Language on there, and you can also find it on the Tia Chucha Press and Red Hen Press, um, as two places you can pre-order them now. Birth Language comes out officially August 4th, but pre-orders are, like, being processed already.

Um, educators, since we're, we're talking as educators, like, can request advance copies. Um, reviewers can revie- can request, um, copies. And, uh, what else am I supposed to say? I mean, I have some events coming up. The book tour is [00:58:00] still being firmed up, so I, I encourage anyone who, whenever this has aired, to, like, still invite me.

Funding is a plus because we know I can't, uh, no longer, as in my first book, I felt like I somehow money was avai- available, more available. But, like, you know, to get me to where you are. Mm. Um, I do have a reading with Beth Piatote on, on July 9th if you're in the San Francisco Bay Area, Medicine for Nightmares, um, reading with her.

Amazing poet, and, uh, she was, like, the director of the arts, um, the Arts Research Center at UC Berkeley. Um, July 11th, I, I have a short play as part of the, um, AAPI Playwrights Festival that's hosted by, um, by CATS, an

organization that celebrates Asian American performing arts. July 11th, San Jose Stage. And then, um, yeah, keep an eye out.

The readings are getting f- firmed up for the [00:59:00] fall.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Mm-hmm.

**Aimee Suzara:** Yeah, and I, I also really like to do, I've always really liked to do lecture performances, workshops, talks, keynotes, like different things that related to the book. So that's also gonna be exciting for me because of all the layers that- Yeah ... we just, we delved a lot into certain features, but there's also some other ones that I could develop talks and pres- presentations around.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Oh, amazing. Thank you so much. Everyone, the, y- all of this will be in the notes, in the show notes and everything, and please definitely check out Amy's website and the book. And let someone, like, actually, like, pick up, you know, and re- and get and republish and get it out there as a souvenir as well. It was a- Um, yeah.

Hey ... it was a, it was a beautiful book. I, I- We're

**Aimee Suzara:** casting that out there now.

**Daniel Dissinger:** Absolutely. I mean, sometimes I'm like, "Maybe one day I'll be, like, this podcast will actually have a press and I could do stuff like that." Ooh. Like that. But I'm- Yeah ... it, you know, thank you so much for being here for this [01:00:00] conversation.

Thank you. I know there are so many other things we could talk about- Yeah ... and so many other things, but it was just the way, like, the conversation went in places, I'm like, "We have to keep on this track. It's amazing."

**Aimee Suzara:** Oh my

**Daniel Dissinger:** gosh. It's fun. But thank you, um, so much everyone. Uh, follow, uh, subscribe, do all the things you do for all the podcasts and, you know, follow Substack.

The podcast is definitely going to be migrating much more to that because WordPress is super expensive for memory, so I can't do it there much longer. Yeah. Mm-hmm. Um, but, you know, please support the podcast and support

the work of Amy, uh, uh, Aimee Suzara, and, um, everybody, thank you so much, and we'll see you in the next episode.

**Aimee Suzara:** Thank you.