

# Introduction to Book

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*Reading Tea Leaves After Trump* is so much more than a collection of stirring poetic reactions to our surreal and dark times. I read it as a play in five acts. Like all great playwrights, Thelma T. Reyna is able to transform her *personal* grief into an expression of our *collective* grief. Each act moves us through the emotional stages of loss as we grieve the temporary death of democracy; the casualties of the latest war on the poor, on women, the black and brown, the vulnerable, the dispossessed; the snuffing out of reason and tolerance; the lethal body blows to Mother Earth. The curtain opens onto a state of disbelief and denial, like walking into our house after a burglary. Reyna finds voice(s) for her rage and ours, filling the stage with characters that help us navigate the new reality, fight depression, and come to terms with what we must do next.

And what characters! Melania, Hillary, Kellyanne Conway and her daughters, James Comey, the two deadly Steves (Bannon and Miller), Betsy De Vos, Martin Luther King, Jr., Heather Heyer, mothers and brothers, the dreadfully ill, the homeless, the undocumented, the Muslim, the fascist, the young soldier, the walking wounded, and of course, the Donald himself, take successive turns in the spotlight. Sets change: the White House, the streets, the bedroom, the hotel bar, Charlottesville, Texas, Afghanistan, and Puerto Rico, the ego and the heart.

Read this book from beginning to end, and you will discover nothing short of a history of our times, “an old event unspooling itself,” to use Reyna’s own prescient words. Trump’s brainless saber-rattling, with its echoes of Hitler and Mussolini and Jefferson Davis, appear on stage alongside flashes of life and love and humor, all comingling on the eve of what feels like end times. And yet, beneath the rage, beneath the cutting satirical tweets, beneath the relentless interrogation of the Trump women, this is a work of empathy in the best sense. Without apology, Reyna steps into the worlds of others and tries to feel her way into their pain, anger, and frustration, elusive as it might be. She animates Trump’s base and reveals how their anguish and confusion can be so easily mobilized by forces that don’t give a damn about their well-being.

*Reading Tea Leaves After Trump* is also a work of mourning. Mourning is what we do when we grieve, and it is not always about loss or endings. I’m reminded of ACT-UP leader Douglas Crimp, who pointed out nearly thirty years ago that the activists fighting the AIDS

pandemic were in a constant state of mourning, since they were losing friends, comrades, and lovers practically every day. But rather than lead to passivity and acceptance, the act of mourning inspired militancy and deepened their commitment to struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Like Crimp, Reyna understands what many of us do not: that we *must* mourn *and* organize. This is why the fifth and final act, "Acceptance," resists closure. If the tea leaves tell us anything, it is that we have to make more tea. Trumpism is not the end of history. As Reyna states in one of her opening poems, "Novas blazed eternally yet disappear in blinks."

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989), 18.