Study Questions

1. The poems in this book present themselves as a series of maps, suggesting that they are charting a territory and rendering it legible so it can be navigated. What implications does this motif have for the topics this book is “mapping?” How does this relate to its recurring themes of erasure and hypervisibility?

2. *Gash Atlas* incorporates references to texts by other writers, from Ovid to Thoreau to Acker and more. Look into one of its references (you can find these on the notes page). What connections are being drawn between these earlier texts and the poems in this collection? Are there notable omissions, alterations, or other points of departure?

3. Who is Columbus in this book? Above and beyond the historical Columbus, his appearances in different guises connect him with an array of cultural figures and social institutions. Do distinct elements of his character remain recognizable from scene to scene? Why is a 15th century explorer the vehicle for all of these other personalities, professions, and choices?

4. *Gash Atlas* frequently describes acts of violence, sometimes in ways that are graphic and sometimes in ways that are dreamlike (and, sometimes, both). What kinds of violence are of greatest concern in this book? Are there limits to the kinds of violence this book is willing to directly represent?

5. Raquel Salas Rivera writes that Jessica Lawson, “knows how language often operates as a colonial mode,” suggesting that *Gash Atlas* must negotiate the danger that the act of representation can itself be a form of harm. What strategies does this book use to operate around the limitations of language itself, and all the histories language brings with it?

6. Many of the poems in this collection locate themselves during the time period of the Trump presidency. How does it reflect on this period of time? What is its relationship to what came before? What comes after?

Writing Prompts

1. Approaching the poem as a map changes its relationship to its own topic, language, and concerns. Write a poem that functions as a “map” of any kind, then reflect on how this changed your approach to the act of writing.
2. Throughout the collection are short scenes written in playscript. Theatre, as an artform of human bodies performing written words on stage, necessarily changes the way we think about the body’s relationship to language. Write a poem that includes a playscript, paying particular attention to the bodies of your characters.

3. Many of the visual poems in this book include elements of hand drawing. Take a short piece of something you've written and print it on a page, leaving lots of space. Draw around the words in order to complete it as a new poem. Consider how the inability to move or replace text impacts the work you create.

4. This book begins with a list poem and ends with a countdown. Think about the differences and overlaps between these two approaches. Write your own list poem or countdown. For an extra challenge, try to see if you can incorporate elements of both!