From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 7
Bagley Wright Lecture Series

Introduction

Anne Holmes: Welcome to "From the Catbird Seat," a poetry podcast from the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I'm Anne Holmes, the Center's digital content manager.

From 2013 to 2016, the Library of Congress hosted six lectures as part of the Bagley Wright Lecture Series. Established by Charlie Wright, publisher of Wave Books, the series provides leading mid-career poets with the opportunity to explore, in-depth, their own thinking on the subject of poetry and poetics, and arranges for the delivery of a series of lectures that result from these investigations.

On today's episode, we catch up with Matthew Zapruder, the editor at large of Wave Books and the former director of the Bagley Wright Lecture Series. In conversation with Rob Casper, the head of the Poetry and Literature Center, Matthew gives some background on the Bagley Wright series, and discusses the six poets who delivered lectures at the Library of Congress: Dorothea Lasky, Joshua Beckman, Timothy Donnelly, Terrance Hayes, Srikanth Reddy, and Rachel Zucker.

We'll also revisit some highlights from a few of these lectures that Rob and Matthew mention. All of the event recordings you'll hear on this episode are available as video webcasts on the Library's website, so if the clips you hear today leave you hungry for more, remember that the full lectures are waiting for you online.

That's enough from me for now. Let's check in with Rob Casper and Matthew Zapruder.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Matthew Zapruder

Rob Casper: Well, I'm thrilled and delighted to be in the Library's Jefferson Building studio with my dear friend Matthew Zapruder, to talk about the Bagley Wright Lectures, which the Library hosted from 2013 to 2015. Thanks for being here with us, Matthew.

Matthew Zapruder: So glad to be here, Rob.

RC: Let's just begin by talking about how these lectures came about. I know we're not the only institution that's had them, but we were a part of this first run of lecturers.

MZ: Mm-hm. The project grew out of an engagement that I, as one of the editors of Wave Books, along with Joshua Beckman, have, with our publisher Charlie Wright, around criticism, and critical work having to do with poetry. We're interested in various critical responses to poems, and how to present for the public writing that illuminates the practice of poetry. And particularly poets who are in what we call mid-career. So, we publish works like that, although we primarily publish poetry at Wave. But the idea came about to maybe support a separate activity that would be specifically to produce some of this new critical work. Through the support of this lecture series.

RC: And what were you hoping that these poets as lecturers might say that wasn't already being said by critics—poetry critics around the country? Or said in a way that you really wanted to hear?

MZ: It's been my experience that poets are sometimes very reticent about their own creative work and about poetry in general, when they are asked about it directly. And at other times, they can be incredibly lucid, particularly when they're put in front of a general audience. And the evidence of that is that it's so much of the—so many of the most important critical statements about poetry, the ones that we read today from throughout history—whether it's by someone like Robert Frost, or T. S. Eliot, or, more recently, Adrienne Rich or Audre Lorde, and in the distant past, you know, Shelley, or many many many many other poets, I could just go on, list-list-list—those began as lectures. And they often began as lectures in front of, like I said, general audiences. A particular example is Wallace Stevens's famous lectures, one of them, which is one of my favorite pieces of writing about poetry ever, which is called "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," which was originally given as a talk in front of a general audience at, I believe, Mount Holyoke College. So I thought, oh, it would be so great to do that, to have our best poets, our finest poets in mid-career, do this in front of general audiences. And what would happen, what would they say, how would they talk about their own work and the poems they're interested in? And so it was kind of an experiment, I guess, in a way. And so it wasn't so much what—that I didn't see these kinds of things being talked about, it was that I wondered what would happen if we put these poets in some interesting situations like that; what would occur.

RC: Well, let's talk about the six poets who came here from 2013 to 2015. Dorothea Lasky, Joshua Beckman, Timothy Donnelly, Terrance Hayes, Srikanth Reddy, and Rachel Zucker, in that order. I'm sure you've had a chance to hear the lectures by all six of those poets: maybe you could talk about what your favorite moments were in their lectures.

MZ: Mm. My favorite moments in all of their lectures were when they revealed something about their own ideas about poetry—and not just ideas, but their own kind of deep connections to poetry. Those moments would arrive unexpectedly in the lectures. Like I'm thinking about when Dottie Lasky talks about the material power of the imagination; that she thinks the world of the imagination, or the imagination itself, is actually a place that one can go, and how she's—and how it's a place we can go together and the poem creates that space. That helped me understand her as a poet better, and I can point to similar moments in all the lectures, when the poets, they'd say something, or their interest would focus around something often surprising, and I would think "that makes so much sense to me." Even for these poets I know quite well, I know their work quite well, actually. It's still so, um—it's like an opening for me. So those were my favorite moments for sure.

Webcast Segue

Anne Holmes: In December 2013, Dorothea Lasky delivered a Bagley Wright lecture at the Library of Congress titled "The Beast: How Poetry Makes Us Human," which explores the wildness in poetry—of language, of the feral "I," of an animal nature that allows the poem to shred expectation. Let's listen to part of Dorothea Lasky's introduction to the lecture, in which she sets out some of these ideas.

Webcast Clip from Bagley Wright Lecture: Dorothea Lasky

Dorothea Lasky: Part of what my discussion today will help to make you think about is the question, how does poetry make us human, connect us to what the animal is, and give us guidance to be of and not of the animal. I think poetry does help us do this. One way it does is to give us a way to relate to animals and why are animals important to poetry, because they are the living travelers with us who are most like and unlike us. Another way that animals are important to us and to poetry is that they give us a way to relate to each other, both the living us and the dead us and the yet who are born to be, who can speak our language, who are waiting to write and rewrite the languages that are yet to be.

In Derrida's "The Animal That Therefore I Am," he talks about a kind of shame he has felt at the idea of a cat seeing him naked, a sort of malaise as he describes that a cat might see him as a thing, that he might be seen through the eyes of another, in this case an animal, a cat is the animal he really is. He writes of this shame.

"Ashamed of what and naked before whom, why let oneself be overcome with shame and why the shame that blushes for being ashamed especially I should make clear if the cat observes me frontally naked, face to face, and if I am naked faced with the cat's eyes looking at me from head to toe, as it were just to see, not hesitating to concentrate its vision in order to see with a view to seeing in the direction of my sex, to see without going to see, without touching yet and without biting although that threat remains on its lips or on the tip of the tongue. Ashamed of what and before whom, ashamed of being as naked as a beast, it is generally thought that the property unique to animals, what in the last instance distinguishes them from man. Is there being naked without knowing it? Not being naked, therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity in short without consciousness of good and evil. Naked without knowing it, animals would not be in truth naked.

I often wonder what insight Derrida gives us with these ideas and what that means for poetry. If an animal is not conscious of being naked, because being naked is somehow like being wild and being a wild animal, then what does it mean to not care that an animal sees you? And if in poetry a poem has a wild lyric “I” that on some level lets itself be shred and does not care that it is naked, then what does that mean about the reader and what the “I” feels for the reader? After all, to let your poem be naked despite the fact that you know people will read it, I think is to have the ultimate empathy, the ultimate in absolute trust, that your reader can bite you but that you are in a dance of animals and the need to express what is our greatest gifts as a humanity. The dance of the spirit through the imagination has manifest in language and color is a need, a want that you are willing to go into the wild night to achieve, to not say that you love something, to say not just that you love it, but that you want it.

Webcast Clip from Bagley Wright Lecture: Dorothea Lasky

Dorothea Lasky: In Derrida's essay, "What Sort of Thing is Poetry," he says that a poem is a sort of like a hedgehog thrown out into the middle of a road, which is, as he writes, "rolled up in a ball prickly with spines, vulnerable and dangerous, calculating and ill adapted, because it makes itself into a ball sensing the danger on the auto route. It exposes itself to an accident. No poem without accident, no poem that does not open itself like a wound, but no poem that is not also just as wounding." Maybe if the gaze of the wild is the poem that you want to but can never write, then on Derrida's definition, the poem is the

thing that you run over on the road that is willing to get hit, open itself up to accident that is animal, in this case hedgehog, in that it allows itself to be available, to be wounded, and can do the wounding. In another lecture of this series called "On the Materiality of the Imagination," I talk about the idea of the imagination being the space that a poem can open up, where we can commune as humans and even as human ghosts, where the living and dead can gaze upon each other. It all begs the questions, what is a ghost and what is consciousness after we die and what is an animal and what is animal consciousness?

Interview Segue

Anne Holmes: We hope that segment of Dorothea Lasky's lecture piqued your interest; like its subject matter, the whole lecture is wild and unpredictable.

Before we listen in on the next lecturer, let's hear a bit more from Rob and Matthew.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Matthew Zapruder

RC: It's interesting: my experience of the lectures by these poets as compared to lectures by more conventional poetry critics was that they were blending the form of talk, of criticism, and even of poetry writing. And I remember with Joshua Beckman, he had these little cards—and he was shuffling through these cards. And each seemed like a little poem, in a way. And I thought, I've never seen anyone give a lecture on poetry quite like that.

MZ: Yeah, they're like these little thought islands, almost, and he's sort of leaping—which is very brave. And when I have to do something like this, I will write down every single word of it. But, um, yeah I agree, and I think, you know, they're poets, so of course the instant that I told them to do something, they would do the opposite thing, and I think it's absolutely like—it's like dealing with a pack of recalcitrant children. Like the minute you would tell them to do something, they're going to like, go do the opposite thing, which is of course incredibly—and then, the thing they did was so much more interesting than my original idea. So that would often happen—so yeah, so the lectures were—yeah, they don't, I think they functioned really well as public talks; they were great experiences to be a part of. They didn't resemble, you know, necessarily like a job talk, or, you know, something that you and I—you and I have sat through like a million of these things, and some of them are really amazing. But a more traditionally formed kind of lecture. Although occasionally they would be like that.

RC: They could get closer to that, but I felt like there was a different kind of charge in general to how they were speaking. And often there was a more personal angle to what they were speaking about.

MZ: For sure.

RC: I mean I think of Timothy Donnelly in his talk, and how much it evoked his childhood home, for instance.

MZ: Yeah, that's a beautiful—there's a long extended passage where he talks about kind of walking around his backyard, and so the little—the wooded area that's sort of around the stones that were there (I don't know if that's what you were talking—)

RC: Yep.

MZ: And uh, yeah, they did—and again, that was something that I've known Timothy a long time, he's a friend, I edited his first book of—his second book of poems; the first one he did with Wave, The Cloud Corporation. You know, so I know him and his work quite well, I know his family—and there were all kinds of things I'd never heard him talk about. That I do think have a lot to do with him as a poet and a person.

Webcast Segue

Anne Holmes: In November 2014, Timothy Donnelly delivered a Bagley Wright lecture at the Library of Congress titled "Meaningfulness and Homesickness." He begins the lecture by reading "The Skater of Ghost Lake" by William Rose Benet, a poem Timothy encountered early in his childhood, and a poem that's steeped in the imagery and tonal mystery of the natural world. As Rob and Matthew just mentioned, Timothy then moves into a description of the forest behind his childhood home, opening up the lecture into a broader reflection on poetry's urge to both make and resist meaning through patterns, the enchantment of sound over sense. Let's listen to the opening segment of the lecture, after Timothy Donnelly reads "The Skater of Ghost Lake," and then we'll skip ahead to hear another segment in which he elaborates on this poem's impact.

Webcast Clip from Bagley Wright Lecture: Timothy Donnelly

Timothy Donnelly: Behind the house I grew up in, there was a small forest. I knew about an acre of it by heart. I've often told myself that if I could travel back to a time before the forest was destroyed, or if the forest hadn't been destroyed but instead remained the way it was throughout my childhood and for a long time before that, then I would still be able, even blind-folded, to find my way around it. I would know how long I had to walk and in what direction in order to reach the sea green lichen-covered boulder, roughly cone-shaped, half submerged in the forest's topsoil. I could place my hand in the shallow divot, chipped into the top of it that would fill with rainwater whenever it rained. Sparrows and jays would bathe and play in it after the rain had passed. Often when I played with action figures the boulder would morph into a rumbling volcano. A short distance to the west, the tallest tree I knew at the time, an old red oak, rose up from a mossy incline, sometimes with a number of moon white mushrooms appearing overnight around its base and on at least one occasion, the bizarre orchid known to us as the lady's slipper, which I was told to hold sacred and never to let anyone pick. It was hard to imagine anyone would want to pick it anyway. It wasn't exactly a shoo-in for the bud vase on the breakfast table, but in its way it was magnificent, a bright, pink veiny brain on a stem, and though it looked like nothing else in the forest, it was clear that it belonged there.

Behind the oak, an old stone wall, half dilapidated, the kind you find all over southern New England, ran off into the distance past where I was allowed to travel alone. Most of these walls were built in the mid 18th and early 19th centuries, I later came to know, first by the crop farmers who struggled to till the region's dark, rich earth, which they would curse to find as crowded with granite as the night sky appeared at the time with stars, and later after the crop farmers migrated west, the livestock farmers, who took their place, added height to the walls they inherited to keep their animals enclosed. I often walked along the tops of these walls as a test of my balance and daring. I remember one rock in

particular about the size and shape of a couch cushion that see-sawed back and forth when I would walk on it, and I remember how to shift my weight from side to side to get it to keep still. Much of this stoned wall was covered over like the other walls like it nearby, with wild blackberry and green briar whose prickly runners left shallow dotted gashes on the shins and calves. Surfing on this rock, which is what it felt like when I tried to steady it, produced the same sound as when I used the genuine volcanic rock mortar and pestle in my kitchen in Brooklyn.

Beyond the wall, a field of low-lying wild blueberry bushes stretched out as far, flat and wide as a baseball diamond, or so it felt to me at the time, but in truth the bushes covered an area probably not much larger than a 1970s McDonald's. Part of what made the field seem so big, in addition to the fact that these memories were made in my earliest childhood, before I knew the standard measure of things, was that I didn't just measure the field by eye but also by hand, branch by branch, almost leaf by leaf as I bent over the bushes to pick from them. Even more importantly, it was measured olfactorily. The scent that rose from the berries in the heat, or else not from the berries alone but also from the dark, small leathery leaves which turned fiery red orange pink in the fall, or even up from the acid Earth itself, filled the air in the area so completely it seemed endless.

Webcast Clip from Bagley Wright Lecture: Timothy Donnelly

Timothy Donnelly: Having at the time such a strong feeling for those pines and to this day associating them with my earliest awakening of some primal sympathy with the natural world, I was startled when I first read “The Skater of Ghost Lake” and hit these two lines in particular: “Steep stand the sentineled deep, dark firs” and “Black stand the ranks of its deep sentinel firs.” I didn't even know what “sentinel” meant at the time. I had to look it up in the glossary in the back of a school book. When I did, it only confirmed what the poem had managed already to convey. Unquestionably the emphasis given to the image by its rhythm, repetition and even the slightly unexpected modifier “deep” made a difference, and a big one. There's an emphatic difference between reading “sentinel firs” in the middle of a rambling paragraph and the prominence it gains when read in the context of a highly patterned poem. The poem seemed to know right in the very fiber of it what I felt so powerfully but never knew how to discuss, not with anyone, not directly. Again, I felt as if a spell had been cast on me and also as if another, the one that would ignore or deny the value of what I had felt in the forest or that denied it because it didn't make the right kind of sense or couldn't or wouldn't be measured by the standard measure of things, had been briefly lifted. Even though it seemed essential to my understanding of the world, among the dearest things I knew I had kept this feeling to myself, kept hidden this powerful awareness not of the forests' distinct meaning but of the sense of meaningfulness that I could be made to feel in it.

I could tell it went against the current of my education and possibly my religion, and it certainly wasn't what the suburbs talked about over dinner. TV couldn't capture it, and moreover I myself had no way of putting it. I had no suitable language for it, no special words to use for the meaningfulness and no sense of how to make good use of the words I already knew. I didn't want to have to call the forest enchanted, although I could half sympathize with those who would.

Interview Segue

Anne Holmes: It's difficult to excerpt this lecture because of its movement and form and expansiveness, but it's that same difficulty that we hope inspires curiosity in watching or listening to the full lecture.

For now, let's check back in with Rob and Matthew.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Matthew Zapruder

RC: That's what I was struck by, with the lectures I went to, and I went to five of the six, is how hard it was for them, though they're all pros as poets, and used to being in front of audiences, and though the audiences they faced at the Library were fairly small, yet it seemed like it was such a different way of thinking about poetry. And they were in process. They hadn't quite figured out exactly what they wanted to say, and I saw how the experience helped them better understand the arguments that they wanted to make about poetry. I mean maybe not only—maybe in just the lectures they were giving but also I could see it having an impact on them in a larger sense.

MZ: Well you can see—you could imagine that—that in a way it might be dangerous to know too much about your own process or who you are as a poet. It's not necessarily the case that knowing more is always better. There's a kind of—you know, and then there's that famous kind of idea, you know, especially around poetry, that people often use that quote from a Wordsworth poem, uh, you know, "We murder to dissect;" this idea that you don't want to meddle too much in the poem or how it was made, because you can end up killing it somehow. I don't—I'm not a big believer in that idea but I can see that it would be possible I guess to talk too much about one's own process and one's own poems. Which is why, in the lectures, I try to encourage them to not just turn inward—not that that's what they would have done, but they—to—it was fine to mostly—I mean I loved that Terrance talked mostly, a lot, about Etheridge Knight, or that Joshua talked a lot about, you know, other books—books that were meaningful to him; we can go down the list, or whatever.

Webcast Segue

Anne Holmes: Let's pause here to listen to part of Terrance Hayes' Bagley Wright lecture, which Matthew and Rob just mentioned. In January 2015, he delivered this lecture at the Library of Congress, titled "Ideas of Influence." He begins the lecture with an overview of a concept called "The Liquid Network," coined by popular science author and media theorist Steven Johnson, to describe how new ideas or movements often arise from common influence. In his lecture, Terrance Hayes uses this sort of business framework as a playful launching pad to discuss liquid networks of poetry—the nature of influence that created the beat generation, for example, or the black arts movement, which he discusses at length. At the center of this lecture on poetic influence is the poet Etheridge Knight, who we'll hear more about now.

Webcast Clip from Bagley Wright Lecture: Terrance Hayes

Terrance Hayes: So now, we are moving into Knight. So, Knight was born in 1931 so he's older than those other guys but only about, you know, five years or so. But he was considerably more seasoned. Before his conviction of armed robbery at 29, he would have likely been just as influenced by the cultural shifts in mid-century America as his peers. The Korean War and the echo of two world wars

abroad, Brown versus Board of Education, Emmett Till, Rosa Parks and other such signals of the Civil Rights movement here in the nation and then in his own home, there's a kind of second wave migration of blacks heading north for work as his family moved from Mississippi to Kentucky and then to Indiana.

But where Baraka, Sanchez, Clifton and Lorde represented a kind of growing black college educated class, Knight dropped out of school at 14, enlisted in the Army and absorbed many of the substances and sounds he encountered. "I came to not through any academic channels," he told Charles Rowell in the late 70's. And he adds, "All of the 50's were a whole drug scene. I fell and went to prison." The range of experiences dramatically separates Knight from his cohort, and I would also say the range of those experiences, how we sort of begin to see him as a more typical kind of model liquid man.

I don't want to make a case for the idea of ancestry as quintessential black or black arts poem or for Knight as a quintessential blues or black arts or black poet, influences I'm arguing is not about promisy but collaboration, not thesis but synthesis. Knight, it must be said, was an uneven poet. He produced few poems especially after his release from prison in '68, but he remains a quintessential, liquid modern man, one who to quote Zygmunt Bauman who taught us about the liquid network, "Had to splice together an unending series of short-term projects and episodes that didn't add up to the kind of sequence to which concepts like ‘career’ and ‘progress’ could be meaningfully applied." In his interview with Rowell, Knight pretty much said, "I pretty much live by poeting. I live from the people. I don't do anything but poet. Sometimes people attach me to universities. If I didn't poet, then I'd be a thief because that's how I started. I don't know anything else except to hustle." So, Knight was, to use Bauman's description, of the liquid modernist, constantly ready and willing to change tactics and short term notice to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret and to pursue opportunities according to their availability, which is really the definition of a hustler. He was always ready to hustle. Hustling gave him access to a range of social circles. He wore street cred. His trillness, which would be a portmanteau. Y'all know what a portmanteau is? A portmanteau of true and real, that's what trill is, as a badge of honor that allowed him to enter many, many social circles. He was, as I heard from dozens, often lent money and was as charming as a fox. He possessed a slippery tongue of a romantic. He was a romantic doomed by all the classic troubles of a bluesman, trouble with love, trouble with law, trouble with place.

Webcast Clip from Bagley Wright Lecture: Terrance Hayes

Terrance Hayes: I want to read this quote to you, which is something he said. He's quoted by Larry Neal, who's writing an essay in '68 about the black arts movement, and he's just quoting some of the key figures and so he quotes here something Etheridge Knight says about black aesthetics. Knight says, "Unless the black artist develops a black aesthetic, he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs or purify old ones and along with other black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends and purify old ones by fire. Further, he must hasten in his own disillusion as an individual in the western sense, painful though the process may be, having been breastfed on the poison of ‘individual experience.’" It's actually in quotes. I think that's either humor, hypocrisy or hustle. Especially when I think about the sort of isolated individual of so many of his poems including the idea of ancestry like that is really rooted in individual experience if

nothing else. So, I think yes, there is some charlatan in the statement, but we could also call it adaptability. We could also call it influence, the way that again depending on his social circle he is going to say what he needed to say. As with Brooks, there is little evidence of kind of like set, stagnant belief in his poems. Instead, it's all fluid. It's all liquid the things that he believes and things that he sort of chooses to go to. So when he writes in the idea of ancestry "I have been at one time or another in love," he reveals first and foremost his relentless romanticism, his desire to be influenced, which is sort of what you might think about love. This is sort of Plato, too, right? In the symposium. The idea that friendships, platonic love and erotic love, it's all about influence. It's all about absorbing the influence of your partner. So, in that regard, he certainly was a classic romantic.

Interview Segue

Anne Holmes: Terrance Hayes goes on to read and discuss some of Etheridge Knight's poems, and expands on ideas of poetic influence. Make sure to watch or listen to the full lecture when you can.

Before we conclude today's episode, let's hear some final thoughts from Rob Casper and Matthew Zapruder on the Bagley Wright lecture series.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Matthew Zapruder

RC: I think all these lectures felt like a means to an end, for me, in terms of getting new audiences to connect to poetry, and also giving poetry readers like myself a new way to look at these writers, and what their concerns were, how they imagine themselves connecting to us as they talked about what they cared about in poetry.

MZ: Yeah. They reveal an interesting thing too, about a prose, is that it's actually—can feel a lot more exposed and intimate than poetry. That was a—in my own writing prose and my own giving of lectures that I've done in my life, I've felt that very strongly. That there's almost a kind of distance you can have when you're reading the poem, like you, like you push the poem out into the room, and it's just sort of out there, and you're looking at it, and the audience is looking at it, everybody's looking at it; but with prose it just feels—and also just the rhythms of it, and the mental movements of it, it just feels, it's very, I feel like I've pried open my skull, and all the gears and machinery is like clanking around in there and everybody can see it in all its un-glorious actuality—so I don't, I don't love that feeling. But I think it can be exciting if you're interested in someone's work, or just interested in how minds work. To see that. And so I felt a lot of that in these lectures too, like, "Wow, that's how you think about that?" How strange and interesting. I wouldn't have thought through that idea that way.

RC: Right. Well, thank you for making this lecture series possible, and bringing these lectures to the Library of Congress.

Conclusion

Anne Holmes: Thank you for joining us on "From the Catbird Seat." To learn more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress, visit us at loc.gov/poetry. You can watch or listen to the full events featured on today's episode by going to loc.gov/discover, and clicking on "Video Webcasts." We'll be back next week for another episode. Stay tuned.