

AWP 2022 | Philadelphia, PA
Event Outline

EVENT TITLE: New Directions in the American Sonnet

Event Description: The American sonnet is having a moment. This panel features scholars and poets discussing the contemporary sonnet and the ways in which today's writers subvert, revise, and creatively destroy the sonnet as an inherited form. How, the panel asks, do poets reimagine this prescribed form to engage questions of race, class, gender, sexuality and power in America? How do today's sonnets negotiate constraint and agency, tradition and innovation?

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Ted Mathys: Ted Mathys is the author of *Gold Cure* (Coffee House Press, 2020) and three previous books of poetry. The recipient of fellowships and awards from the NEA, NYFA, and Poetry Society of America, he is an assistant professor of English at Saint Louis University and President of the Board of Saint Louis Poetry Center.

Event Participants

Dora Malech: Dora Malech is the author of four books of poetry: *Flourish*, *Stet*, *Say So*, and *Shore Ordered Ocean*. A former Amy Clampitt Fellow and Ruth Lilly Fellow, her poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant professor in The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.

John Murillo: John Murillo is the author of the poetry collections *Up Jump the Boogie* and *Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry*. His honors include the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the Four Quartets Prize, and others. He is assistant professor of English and director of creative writing at Wesleyan University.

Kazim Ali: Kazim Ali is a poet, translator, essayist and fiction writer. His most recent books are *The Voice of Sheila Chandra* (poems), and a nonfiction book *Northern Light: Power, Land, and the Memory of Water*. He is a professor in the Literature Department at the University of California, San Diego.

Simone Muench: Simone Muench is the author of six poetry books including *Wolf Centos* and *Suture* (written with Dean Rader). Co-editor of the collaborative writing anthology *They Said* and a recipient of NEA, VSC, and Yaddo fellowships, she serves as advisor for *Jet Fuel Review* and poetry editor for *Tupelo Quarterly*.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good afternoon, and welcome to “New Directions in the American Sonnet.” My name is Ted Mathys, and I will moderate the panel today.

A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Participant Initial Remarks

The moderator will introduce the panel. The panelists then will engage the audience for ten minutes each. The panel will conclude with a ten-to-fifteen-minute audience Q&A.

Dora Malech: Nearly 800 years since its invention, the sonnet is in a period of extraordinary production and development, taken up by poets from every corner of the aesthetic field. In American poetry, numerous collections have centralized the sonnet in recent years, often in book-length sonnet sequences. Formal and formally subversive sonnets by established and emerging poets show the form continuing to function as a poetic bellwether, revealing how American poets seek to engage with forbears and tradition, from homage to interrogation, as they negotiate public and private questions of nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, and diaspora within the form’s peculiar confines. As co-editor of a forthcoming anthology of essays and poems tracing the history of the sonnet in America, I found it impossible to encapsulate and fully represent the flourishing of the contemporary American sonnet in a collection that begins in the 1700s. I do, however, believe it is possible and worthwhile to illuminate a few noteworthy recurring craft elements of contemporary American sonnets that might help contextualize some of the individual craft discussions that follow.

John Murillo: I will discuss the process by which I came to write my sonnet sequence, “A Refusal to Mourn the Deaths, by Gunfire, of Three Men in Brooklyn.” I will begin by reading the final sonnet in the sequence (the “root” sonnet), then relay, as best I can, some considerations that led me to choose the heroic crown as a vehicle for my topic, highlighting

some of the challenges presented and opportunities provided by the form. I will end with a brief note about the sonnet tradition in African-American poetry, from Claude McKay to Terrance Hayes.

Simone Muench: *The Sonnet as Conversation and Collaboration*. Alongside the resurgence and experimentation of the sonnet over the last few decades, there seems also to have been a surge in collaborative poetry. Building on my work in editing *They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing* and prior work as a poet and teacher engaging the sonnet form, including my book of sonnets, *Suture*, co-written with Dean Rader, I've been developing another book of collaborative poetry with my friend Jackie K. White. While exploring a variety of forms—from erasures to centos—, we've discovered that many of our poems call out to be sonnets. Like our project, much contemporary collaborative work experiments with the sonnet form, which seems organic to us, given its core rhetorical structure of problem/solution or question/answer, or what we frame as “call and response.” In fact, the tradition of collaborative sonnets, in the form of the bouts-rimes, has been around supposedly since the 17th century, and was famously resurrected in 1865 by Alexander Dumas who published a book of bouts-rimes. I'll be examining the conversational and collaborative invitation of the sonnet, while noting that while contemporary sonnets tend to eschew the formalities of meter and rhyme, the use of the volta at the heart of a sonnet's framework provides a signature of reference to, perhaps an honoring of the tradition, as it allows so beautifully for the dialogical quality of the sonnet to emerge.

Kazim Ali : The sonnet is a structured box in which chaos can unleash. The controlled circumstance of fourteen lines with a turn somewhere within allows the intrepid writer to loose their voice and lose something of structure even while structured. I suppose this is why I am attracted not necessarily to the sole form of a single sonnet without context but of the sonnet-in-sequence. Sequences by Berrigan, Mayer, Lerner, Holiday, and Demske in formed my own writing of the sonnets in *The Voice of Sheila Chandra*. Fracture, dispossession, collage, and fragment came to counterpoint the centuries of tradition behind the received form. Music informed it as did dance. The most interesting sonnet is not one that eschews some rule or another but one that hews as close as possible while reaching for the absolutely new.

Ted Mathys: I'll read one sonnet from *Gold Cure* in which the final line ruptures into a half-page screenplay, and I'll offer brief thoughts on the role of the line some recent American sonnets. At moments in American poetic history, the line has served as a site where poets stage autonomy from European inheritances. Whitman, a fan of Shakespeare's sonnets, wrote a sonnet titled “I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,” that Robert Hass suggests is the first free-verse sonnet. Whitman's sonnet rejects European meter and rhyme in favor of

the long, breathy lines that would come to characterize *Leaves of Grass*. William Carlos Williams later grumbled that after the Industrial Revolution, American poets had broadened and developed original poetic themes, but remained beholden to staid European senses of line – arguing for a “revolution in the conception of the poetic foot.” As American sonnets went through a century of permutations and deformations, they mostly retained a relationship, however oblique, to the central notion of 14 lines. I’m interested in how contemporary poets extend the sonnet as a lineated form to its breaking point, constructing “lines” that veer off into prose. I’ll touch on the long-lined horizontal trifold passage in Diane Seuss’s *frank: sonnets*; paradoxical prose sonnets by poets like Jessica Baran, Mathias Svalina, Monica Youn and Dana Levin; and the ways in which Nick Demske’s sonnets split phonemes, morphemes, and words to satirize the integrity of line breaks.

Potential Initial Questions

- 1) Given the sonnet’s elasticities, to write a sonnet today is to signal an engagement with poetry *qua* poetry as much as it is to honor or subvert particular expectations of the form. In Oren Izenberg’s formulation, “Even a form as generically typical and apparently rule bound as the sonnet can spin outward by force of revision and extension [...] until the choice of form signifies little more than a will to relationship with the poetic tradition.” In your writing, how do you think about this “will to relationship” with the longer arc of sonnet writers, if at all?
- 2) Since Petrarch’s “scattered rhymes” the sonnet has often existed in series and sequences that build loose narratives through multiple discrete lyric engagements. What does the sonnet in multiple open up for your writing?
- 3) I’d like to hear from the panel about the sonnet and creative constraint. In his sonnet “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room,” Wordsworth offers a litany of actors who find comfort in constraint because of the “weight of too much liberty” – nuns in convents, students in their study carrels, bees flying into bell-shaped foxglove flowers, etc. Wordsworth declares that like these actors, he finds “solace” in binding himself in the sonnet’s “scanty plot of ground.” Contrast this with Terrance Hayes’s depiction of the American sonnet as four different types of constraining space into which the “you” of his sonnets is “locked”: it is “part prison,” “part panic closet,” “part music box,” “part meat grinder.” There is both violence and song, both safety in a panic closet and the threat that looms beyond. How have you negotiated the sonnet as a constraining or liberating force?