

Event Title: No One Cares About Your Kid: Navigating Parenthood as a Poetic Subject

Event Description: If it's true that no one wants to hear about another person's kids, how then do we write about parenthood? How do we differentiate our writing from the deluge of poems on parenting? How do we craft fresh, compelling work for a wide range of audiences, including non-parents? Five poets discuss how parenthood changed their relationship to their work, sharing practical writing advice for the poet-parent and techniques they developed to avoid cliché and self-indulgence.

Event Category: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer/Moderator: Casey Thayer—Casey Thayer is the author of *Self Portrait with Spurs and Sulfur*. His second collection *Rational Anthem*, finalist for the Miller Williams Prize, is forthcoming. Winner of the Cow Creek Chapbook Prize and Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize, he's published work in *AGNI*, *APR*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Event Participants

Neelanjana Banerjee—Neelanjana Banerjee's writing has appeared widely in places like *Prairie Schooner*, *World Literature Today*, *The Rumpus* and many other places. She is the co-editor of two poetry anthologies, *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Literature* and *The Coiled Serpent*, and is the Managing Editor of Kaya Press.

Lisa Fay Coutley—Lisa Fay Coutley is the author of *tether* (Black Lawrence, 2020), *Errata* (Southern Illinois, 2015), winner of the Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition, and *In the Carnival of Breathing* (BLP, 2011), winner of the Black River Chapbook Competition. She is also the editor of the forthcoming anthology, *In the Tempered Dark: Contemporary Poets Transcending Elegy* (Black Lawrence, 2023). She's the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship, fellowships and scholarships to the Sewanee and Bread Loaf Writers' Conferences, an Academy of American Poets Levis Prize, and the 2021 *Gulf Coast Poetry Prize*, selected by Natalie Diaz. Recent prose and poetry appears in *Barrelhouse*, *Brevity*, *Copper Nickel*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Waxwing*. She is an Associate Professor of Poetry and Creative Nonfiction in the Writer's Workshop at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Eugenia Leigh—Eugenia Leigh is the author of *Blood, Sparrows and Sparrows*. Her second collection, *Bianca*, is forthcoming, and recent poems have appeared in *The Nation*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*. She is a Kundiman fellow and the recipient of awards from *Poets and Writers Magazine*, *Poetry Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Trey Moody—Trey Moody is the author of *Thought That Nature*, winner of the Kathryn A. Morton Prize. His more recent poems have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Believer*, and *New England Review*. He is an assistant professor of English at Creighton University.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Housekeeping announcements:

- We want to recognize the space we're inhabiting together. Please feel invited to use it in whatever way is accessible to you. You are welcome to move around, to get up, to go out and come back in, to write notes, or to use this space in any way that feels right to you. We also encourage you to move up/move back, that is, to challenge yourself to be a leader if you're usually not or to make space for others if you usually are. (Adapted from Margaret Price and Public Lab)

- We also want to acknowledge that the land we are meeting on today long served as a site of exchange amongst a number of Indigenous peoples, including the Lenape peoples. We wish to acknowledge the painful history of genocide and forced removal from this territory, and we pledge to move beyond words into actions that fully embody a commitment to Indigenous rights and cultural equity. (Composed following guidelines prescribed by the U.S. Department of Arts and Culture)
- Format/hybrid set-up overview
- Copies of the remarks and poems in 12 pt. font and 18 pt. font are available at the front of the room
- Outline and poems uploaded to the AWP website in .pdf and .doc formats

It goes without saying that having children changes one's life in endless ways (or, I suppose, ideally it does), and much space has been given to discussions on how to persist as a writer in the face of this new responsibility. Less has been discussed about how to account for this change in one's writing. How can we write compellingly about parenthood when shelves are filled with books describing the way a child's wonder can make us re-see the world or how the fragility of an infant makes us recognize the ephemeral nature of existence? In this session, our panelists will discuss the techniques they've employed as they've attempted to avoid sentimentality and easy platitudes about parenthood, using the example of one of their poems as the foundation for their remarks. Panelists will then field questions from the moderator as well as from the audience and will leave audience members with some techniques and prompts to jumpstart their own parenthood poems.

In the interest of time, we will forego a recitation of our biographies—they are included in our outline for review—but I was hoping that we could go around and introduce ourselves by giving our names, pronouns, and titles and by telling everyone the ages and, if you're comfortable, names of your child or children.

Abstracts of Participant Opening Remarks

(Please note: participants will start by reading one of their poems and will cite this poem as an illustration of the craft concerns referenced in their prepared remarks. You can find a folio of these poems in a separate attachment uploaded to the AWP website.)

Neelanjana Banerjee—My remarks will be about how I was very anti-writing about "parenting" early on in my time as a parent because much of my writing community were NOT parents and I was a bit allergic to mommy culture, so "Homeland" came from a really fun event in collaboration with Yago Cura, LA poet and librarian, who asked some local writers to engage with Latinx writers to draw attention to Latinx writers in the library catalog, so thus I chose Rocque Dalton, the El Salvadoran poet, and found so much resonance with him and his sense of exile and displacement, as a child of immigrants, and that led me back to my son. In general, in terms of craft—discovering new writers, in different languages—can really blow open your process, as it did for mine here, and that you don't have to wait for someone outside to do so, but give yourself these assignments—go get lost in the stacks and discover new writers. Now, many years later, with two children, I feel much closer and almost needing to write about being a parent, and I am glad, and feel sorry for myself at that time who was so anti, but this poem was part of that journey.

Lisa Fay Coutley— I'm very invested in the ways that the emotional landscape (for me, generally grief) and the poem's form work in tandem. Structure is a function of content. In "On Home"—one of the first poems I wrote in a raw, honest attempt to capture my feelings of single motherhood (which certainly go against the grain of the expected, conventional ideas of motherhood)—I realized I was in the territory of a sonnet that carried a single line of extra weight. That monostich was alone and exposed and just a bit more than this (broken) form is meant to hold. Only looking back on the poem did I realize the ways in

which the form enacted its content, but once I became aware of this, I've attempted to tend that gesture in other motherhood poems, allowing for the poem's organic shape to arise through an initial draft and then revising toward heightening a poem's specific effect.

Eugenia Leigh—I've discovered that when I think I want to tell a story about my child, I'm likely longing to address a deeper narrative. Instead of writing around an anecdote involving my child, I store these away and pull them out when I need them to substantiate or highlight a much larger point. The incident with the first leaf, for example, entered "The First Leaf" about a year or so after the first draft was written and had been revised many times before. My first collection of poetry tells the narrative of childhood abuse and its lasting ramifications in the young adult speaker, but becoming a parent has helped me see that I wrote that entire book from the perspective of a child longing to reconcile her past and her relationship to her parents, her toxic attachment figures. I recall one reviewer commented that I wrote the book "with shocking compassion toward the abuser," which I see now was a classic childhood coping mechanism at play. Parenthood has pushed me to revisit that narrative more critically. Most importantly, it gave me access to my anger. What I'm especially interested in is how my use of the second-person "you" has evolved. In those earlier poems, the speaker often contended with her trauma by addressing God or addressing a lover if she used the second person. Not one poem addressed her parents. "The First Leaf" is the first poem I've written in which the speaker addresses her abusive father directly. It is the second poem in my forthcoming book. I plan to discuss this craft choice a bit more. I will also speak briefly about inviting anger into our poems. Anger, I've learned, is typically a secondary emotion. Anger tends to belie fear. Or grief. So if we find that our poem is angry, we must probe the poem more intentionally and ask what it is afraid of. While I felt empowered to address my father angrily in this poem, the real poem I needed to write was about my fear that I would become my father. If I had stopped at anger, my revisions would have reached their limit sooner. For example, most of the earlier drafts of this poem ended with "He looks so much like his father. / Nothing at all like you." But once I let myself access the fear the anger was disguising, I was able to come across the *real* ending and revise accordingly: "He looks so much like his father. / Nothing at all like *us*."

Trey Moody—Before my daughter was born, I tried my best to avoid the personal in my writing. When I was a child, my father died young, and I inherited an aversion to sentimentality. When my daughter was born, I thought I'd never write again (and I know how not-alone I was in this new-parent thinking). In the act of making myself write in the little time I had in those months and years of exhaustion and joy, my daughter (or sometimes "a daughter") kept appearing in my poems. So did my father. In addition to my daughter's birth further heightening my awareness of the good and ill in the everyday world, even in my poetry I felt I was being held more accountable. I'll be sharing a poem of mine—"Scrubbing the Skillet,"—to highlight some of these shifts in my writing, and to demonstrate some techniques I've found helpful in writing about my daughter, including parallel narrative, inanimate-object study, a slightly longer line, and third-person point of view. In writing about my daughter, the first challenge is finding myself in the poem, but my hope is that through such technique and subject matter, readers will find their specific selves, too.

Casey Thayer—In the run up to the birth of my daughter and in the first few months after she arrived, I carried heavy anxiety over how to approach fatherhood in my work, worried about falling into cliché and tired, expected tropes. At the same time, I found in myself a growing new awareness of and responsibility to the larger world, perhaps because I now felt deeply tied to someone who would be inheriting it. In my remarks, I will use one of the poems I wrote after the birth of my daughter—"Reminding Myself That We Are Not Remarkable"—as an illustration of some of the techniques I've attempted to employ in my work to address my anxiety over cliché and my need to consume information about the world. Specifically, I'll examine my use of rhetorical linguistic structures, repetitions of sound, and secondary themes as a way to (hopefully) bring depth to my world and to make the private more interesting to the public.

Moderator Questions

- In introducing a poem about making valentines with her children, Carrie Fountain wrote, “Once I believed to remain true to my art I had to keep the world away. My feeling of myself as an artist has changed. To remain true to my art, I try to be awake in the world. I try to succumb to it...and I try to make something of it.” Large opening question: what changes have you noticed in your perception as an artist following the birth of your children?
- Lisa says that as a writer she’s always attempting to shift her perspective in some way (reading, researching)—how has the experience of becoming a parent shifted the ways you view the world in your poetry and your poetry in the world?
- Has becoming a parent made you investigate your own being a poet in any unexpected or meaningful ways?
- It strikes me that the most “poetic” moments as a parent—the first time your child grabbed your thumb and wouldn’t let go or sang his or her first song or smelled a flower in a garden—are also the most cliché. How have you been able to embrace or avoid these moments in your work? What ways have you found to “make it new?”
- What changes did you have to make to your writing practice after the arrival of your child/children?
- Wayne Miller has written about his worry over treating his daughter as “an extension” of himself. Other writers have shared concerns about their children eventually reading work ostensibly about themselves. Do you have anxieties about representing your children in your work, about sharing details about their lives? What parameters should guide us when determining what to share and what to withhold in our work?
- At what point (if ever) did you start involving your children in the discussion about whether to & how to write about them? (e.g. asking them for consent, if that's something you choose to do)
- Do you discuss your writing about your children with their other parent if they're in the picture? To what extent do you take in their input?
- Are there certain topics regarding your children that you choose never to write about?
- Wayne Miller has also describe the dichotomy between “large-scale”/“public” subject matter and “little” poems about family. How do you navigate this divide? How do you ensure that your work has a larger resonance to a general readership?
- If you’ve ever found yourself in the mindset of feeling like you only know how to write about your child(ren) and wanted to change that cycle, what have you done to return to non-child(ren) subject matter?

Audience Q&A Session