

EVENT TITLE: Heroic Crowns: On the Values of Difficulty and Dazzle

Event Description: Notoriously hard to write, the heroic crown is a tightly linked sequence of 15 sonnets that offers poets a chance to prove their virtuosity on the page. In this panel, five sonneteers who have enlarged the tradition of the heroic crown will discuss a range of strategies for approaching the form. Through an examination of techniques such as extended metaphor, lyric fragmentation, and formal flexibility, they will provide tools that other poets can employ when attempting their own heroic crowns.

EVENT CATEGORY: Poetry Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Matt Miller: Matt W. Miller is the author of *Tender the River*, *The Wounded for the Water*, *Club Icarus*, and *Cameo Diner*. A winner of the Pablo Neruda Prize, The Trifecta Poetry Prize, and fellowships from Stanford University and the Sewanee Writers Conference, he teaches and lives in coastal New Hampshire.

Event Participants

Laurie Ann Guerrero: Laurie Ann Guerrero is the author of *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*, *A Crown for Gumeccindo*, & *I Have Eaten the Rattlesnake*. San Antonio Poet Laureate (2014) & Texas Poet Laureate (2016), she is an associate professor of poetry & gender studies at Texas A&M University-San Antonio.

Alexis Sears: Alexis Sears is the author of *Out of Order*, winner of the 2021 Donald Justice Poetry Prize and the Poetry By the Sea Book Award: Best Book of 2022. She earned her BA at Johns Hopkins University and her MFA at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has been widely published in literary journals.

Chelsea Woodard is the author of *At the Lepidopterist's House*, winner of the 2022 Michael Waters Poetry Prize (Southern Indiana Review Press, 2023), *Solitary Bee* (Measure Press, 2016), and *Vellum* (Able Muse Press, 2014). Her work is also forthcoming in the anthology, *In the Tempered Dark: Contemporary Poets Transcending Elegy* (Black Lawrence Press, 2024).

What We Will Cover in This Panel

Matt Miller (10 minutes):

TS Eliot famously said that “When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas.

Given total freedom, the work is likely to sprawl.” This strict framework is perhaps no more apparent than in the heroic crown of sonnets. Historically it is a form bound by rhyme, meter, repetition, and a length, while not the marathon of the epic, is certainly no sprint. And it demands not just poetic skill but poetic stamina and almost a fool’s faith to even try it. In many ways, it is cousin to the essay, trying or attempting to find a meaning in not just the lived experience but in the experience of writing through such a strict form and discovering what is yielded when the ligaments of skill, imagination, and even physical capability, are stretched like this. It is the strictness of its form that pushed the writer to go places they would not have and could not have gone before, both in lyric and reflection. And even when the poet bends or recreates the form, the forms created are also binding and bend the direction of what the poet will discover in the process of writing it. All poetry lends itself to discovery, to the surprise Frost seems to demand for the writer so that the reader experiences it as well. And yet the crown lends itself to discovery, to what would not have been found if not for the form. This perhaps is its draw, this idea of what will happen while essaying this quest. It is too arduous a task to enjoy without the possibility of discovery, a discovery that culminates in that 15th jewel sonnet. Indeed, if you already possessed that jewel, why would you even bother to seek it out?

Laurie Ann Guerrero (10 minutes):

After a great loss—the death of my grandfather—I needed to contain myself. I thought immediately of sonnets—sonnets, which I had, until then, despised for their arrogance and institutionalization. So damn full of rules and inflicting of centuries of conformity. And challenging—both mentally and spiritually—especially as a brown woman who's watched so many of her own, grandfather included, suffocate under the weight of induced borders, labels, lines we ought not cross, assimilation in language and culture. Why would I, or anyone like me, choose to corral our voices, our spirits, into a small box of someone else’s making—especially when we’re still having to exist in such a contrived manner in so many other aspects of our lives? But it was this challenge that lured me. It was exactly the thing I needed to get up and get to work—employ the brain and not the heart. It was a system that

was incredibly difficult to navigate with any sense of security or hope. It became so that I only wanted to finish. Where I drew the competence and the strength to do so was a complete surprise.

Alexis Sears (10 minutes):

Somehow both the easiest and most challenging poetic form, the heroic crown of sonnets allows poets to self-indulge without abandoning craft or technique. The last line of a sonnet becoming the first line of the next lets me ruminate and focus on a particular subject while nonetheless progressing from one idea to the next instead of becoming stuck in a repetitive loop. What I love about the heroic crown is that it is structured enough to provide organization—especially when I’m writing about emotional, complex subjects— but it isn’t so constricting that I struggle to find freedom to say what I need to say. I particularly enjoy writing the 15th sonnet (the master sonnet); combining the first lines of the previous 14 sonnets gives me the chance to revisit what I wrote but from a fun, playful, and unexpected angle that feels like its own new sonnet as opposed to merely a summary. The sonnet is my favorite form because, as cheesy as it may sound, it is in many ways a reflection of life. The majority of the poem focusing on love (of any kind) followed by a surprise or shift in emotion/thought represents that, although we know change is a certainty, we never know just when or how it will occur.

Chelsea Woodard

In her micro essay, “An Intact World,” that serves as a preface to *Mother Love*, Rita Dove describes the sonnet as a “beautiful bubble,” something with “prim borders,” something that is whole and complete and inviolable. She wonders if the sonnet could “also be a talisman against disintegration [.]” I love and gravitate towards the sonnet for many of these reasons. Lately, I write mainly sonnets (at least one out of every three poems). There is something deeply satisfying in the confined and guarded space—enough room to work through a problem or better understand it by the end, and then move on. There is a neatness in the sonnet that does not exist in life. It lends itself to quick bursts or heartbreaks; it provides a container (a beautiful and tension-filled one) for life’s messiness—for things that feel uncontainable. But with the crown, there is a breaking outside of these borders. While the linking is patterned and predictable, there is an untidiness to working through a problem or process across and within multiple sonnets, especially

fifteen. There is room for rumination and return and interconnectedness, which an individual sonnet eschews altogether by its “intact” nature. I find a crown so much messier and harder, and less immediately satisfying— certainly less controlled. But I also think it is truer to life and the ways in which we experience catharsis or move through an experience or idea or obsession. There is inherently overlap between what was, what is, and what will be. While sonnet logic is lovely in its discrete shape, perhaps the movement in a crown of sonnets, especially the longer heroic crown, is more mimetic of our patterns of thought, especially when trying to understand something difficult or ineffable.

Moderator Questions (15 minutes):

- 1) Why were you attracted to this form?
- 2) How strict or relaxed are you when it comes to the “rules” of writing a crown? How do you find a balance between tradition and experimentation?
- 3) Do you think certain topics or subject matters are particularly suited to exploration in a heroic crown?
- 4) Questions from the audience!