COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE #110

Guest(s): Rachel Zucker

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PRE-INTERVIEW

[music]

Conversation between Rachel Zucker and Moses (Rachel's son):

- Okay, I'm ready.
- Are you going to do it stand up?
- Yeah, I'm going to stand up.
- Are you recording already?
- Yeah. Um, okay.
- So what do you want to talk about?
- Well, so, I think V was curious about, um, you know, the dog is fighting for attention.
- She sure is.
- It's time for her to be, to eat. Hold on a second, let me feed her, I'll come right back.

INTRODUCTION

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello and welcome to the first of five episodes of a special sub-series of Commonplace, in which I present the Director's Cut, or the Director's Un-cut, version of a series of lectures that became a series of essays in my book, *The Poetics of Wrongness*, which was published this year, 2023, by Wave Books.

The Torah, or the Bible, or as it is known to some, the Old Testament, has two contradictory creation stories in Genesis. Similarly, and yes, I realize the chutzpah of this analogy, Commonplace has several competing, contradictory, equally true origin stories. One of the origin stories, and I've told this several times before, is that my oldest son Moses, who you just heard briefly at the intro to the intro to the intro, was very interested in Marc Maron for a long period of time, and As a way of being close to him and knowing what he was listening to, I started listening to Marc Maron's podcast, WTF.

And I really liked it. I, I liked the conversations. I liked the depth of the conversations that Mark Maron has. I liked Mark Maron's vulnerability, his sort of self-awareness at moments. I also didn't like aspects of his podcast. Um, I felt it was too self-promotional. I felt it was too macho. I felt that, uh, I felt like, wow, maybe I could do this and maybe I could do this better, or at least more my way.

And so I started Commonplace and I decided, well, I'm not going to have comedians and celebrities. I'm going to have poets and artists and the people who, first of all, will be willing to talk to me and also the people that I really want to talk to, and I'm going to do it in a similar way, with an introduction and a sort of personal context, but in a way that's less self-promotional and less macho.

The second origin story for Commonplace that I'm going to share with you today is that I was asked to write a series of three to five lectures by the Bagley Wright Lecture Series. On my history as a poet, what I care about in poetry, and my poetics. And I wrote these lectures in 2015 and 2016, and I delivered them in about ten different venues across the country. And when the, uh, travel for the Bagley Wright Lecture Series was over, I came home. And a lot of things sort of fell apart for me, including the feeling of loss. Even though I was tremendously nervous about writing and delivering these lectures, there was something truly thrilling about the experience of having an audience, relating to the audience, and

especially, my favorite part of all, was the question and answer sessions after um, each lecture. And as my lecture tour came to an end, I started experimenting with interviewing, which later became recording conversations with these poets, in a way as a way of resurrecting this experience of having a question and answer session with an audience. Um, I loved that and it was in such stark contrast to the interruptibility, the banality, the responsibility, the sort of, anti-intellectualness that I felt, uh, in at home at that point in my life, with my husband and my children.

[5:22]

So in some ways, Commonplace was an invention to recreate a serious poetry community, um, a serious poetry audience, and this experience of, of having conversations that were really sustaining and meaningful about poetry, but *also* about ethics, how to live, how to write in sustainable and long-lasting ways.

And if you've been listening to Commonplace for the past six, almost seven years, you'll know that those are the questions that I've been asking over and over again. Okay, so today I would like to share with you the first of these lectures.

So this is the title lecture in the book, *The Poetics of Wrongness*, and it is the first lecture I gave and one of the last lectures I gave. I gave it at the Library of Congress in I believe December of 2015, and you're, you're not going to hear the audio from that. You're going to hear the audio from, uh, the time that I gave it in November of 2016 at Seattle Arts and Lectures. And... it changed somewhat over the course of that time, and it also is somewhat different in the book.

You'll hear Ellen Welker, who's amazing. You'll hear her introduction to the lectures. After the audio from the Seattle Arts in Lecture, you will hear the continuation of my conversation with Moses about this lecture, and I'm trying to think if there's anything else I want you to know before I turn it over to the pre-recorded intro from Ellen.

Yeah, I would really, really like you to buy the book, *The Poetics of Wrongness*, available by Wave Books. I am here self-promoting, self-promoting a la Marc Maron. Here I go. And it's uncomfortable for me, and I'm doing it, and I will

contradict myself, as you will hear in this lecture, and then the following lectures will also contradict this lecture.

Hooray!

I'd like to thank Ellen Welker, I'd like to thank Heidi Broadhead, I'd like to thank everybody at, uh, the Bagley Wright Lecture Series. If you are a Commonplace patron, there will be lots of goodies for you. I'm teaching a class that goes along with this book, and I'll say more about that in a following episode.

There will be some extra resources, including some audio of poems from *Sound Machine* [by Raymond Antrobus] that relate to this lecture that I was writing at the same time that I was writing this lecture, or that I wrote right after this lecture, somewhat in response to this lecture, as well as some classroom exercises, or prompts, writing prompts that I came up with, uh, in during the course of teaching, uh, a class independently, based on this lecture and this book.

Please buy the book, please become a Commonplace patron, please take a class with me. Or don't do any of those things. Alright, take care. Here's Ellen, here's the lecture, and at the end, you'll hear more from me and Moses.

[9:04]

SEATTLE ARTS AND LECTURES SERIES

[music]

ELLEN WELKER: Welcome to the first episode of Season 8 of the Bagley Wright Lecture Series on Poetry Podcast. I'm Ellen Welker, coordinator for the series. Season 8 is comprised of lectures written and delivered by Rachel Zucker during her tenure as a Bagley Wright lecturer. Rachel Zucker's lectures ask questions about obedience, wrongness, and decorum.

Like her poetry, the lectures are born from a long lineage of female writers and artists who ask, “What now? What next? And am I allowed to do this? To break

that?" Rachel considers the history of confessional poetry, the ethical consequences of representing real people in art, and the other great medium that has influenced her work, photography.

Exploring how it taught her to look for, but also question, truth and permission in art. Today, we'll hear the "Poetics of Wrongness and Unapologia," given November 14th, 2016, in partnership with Seattle Arts and Lectures. A quick note about this lecture. Just prior to beginning, Zucker gives a nod to the timing of writing this talk, and I want to clarify that she's speaking about having written it 16 months prior to the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, and to the fact that she is now giving this talk six days after his election.

[10:32]

And now, here's Rachel Zucker.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I want to say one more thing before I start, which is that these lectures were written about this one, in particular, was the first, well, you'll hear, but, um, this one was written about 16 months ago. So, it's important to keep that in mind when you're listening, um, to it. Uh, I decided not to rewrite it right now, um, for several reasons.

First of all, I think it's still relevant or relevant in a different way. And also I am not ready to rewrite it. I don't exactly know how to change it or how to think about it. I'll talk a little bit about that at the very end. The one thing I will say is that I use the word "wrongness" quite a lot and the word "wrong" has recently been used in a somewhat nefarious way, uh, which is not the way in which I'm using it.

The Poetics of Wrongness. I'm writing this lecture in the middle of a particular night in my particular life. This is relevant. Three years ago I was asked to write these lectures and it seemed impossible. I'd never given lectures. I imagined that giving a lecture would require me to tell other people what I think, what I know, and that's not really my style.

Maybe giving a lecture required me to tell people what *they* should think, which is *really* not my style. So what is my style?, you might wonder. I'm getting to that. Stay with me. Stay in the present, this moment, for a moment. I am, at this particular time in my particular life, the mother of three sons, sixteen, fourteen, and eight.

This is relevant.

What you need to know about this experience is that I am always wrong. [Laughs]. I have learned from my 14-year-old that I am always not listening, even when I think I am listening. I am not helping when I am trying to help. I don't get it even when I am trying to understand. My body is wrong, my presence is wrong. The only thing more wrong is my absence.

When I am present, it is embarrassing. When I am absent, it is wounding. “Weren't you ever embarrassed by *your* parents,” he asks, when he doesn't want me to meet him after the movie he's going to with his friends. “Yes,” I say. “I was embarrassed by my mother every moment of every day and night when I was your age,” I do not say.

But, it is news to me, unpleasant news, that I am now *that* mother, that embarrassing mother, although the fact that this is news is probably proof that I wasn't listening, that I don't get it, that everything about me is wrong. My 16-year-old doesn't find me personally embarrassing. From him, I discover that I am rather universally flawed, mistaken, and existentially irredeemable [laughter].

My *wrongness* is part of the human condition. I am just one not-very interesting specimen of general disappointment [laughter]. With surprising patience, a raised eyebrow, and frequent deep sighing, he explains the many ways in which my ideas about gender, race, mathematics, science, economics, politics, history, psychology, and countless other topics are outdated, erroneous, and, sometimes, reprehensible.

My just-turned eight-year-old vaulted into his teenagehood from his toddler phase, in which everything everyone said or did was indisputably wrong if it conflicted with what he thought and wanted, directly into his Woody Allen phase, in which he

daily confronts me with questions like, “Can you tell me one thing that matters after the world ends? See, nothing matters, right?” Or, “If everyone dies, then why does being a good person while you're alive matter if eventually you're going to die and everyone you ever might help will also die?” [Laughter]

[00:15:00]

There are no right answers to these questions, and this makes me both wrong and profoundly disappointing. Also, I am specifically wrong about everything having to do with soccer, football, music, the appropriate volume of music, the purpose of school, that there is a purpose, whether so and so is a nice person or not, what is funny, what is not funny, what is too rough or dangerous, and the matter of playing ball in the apartment.

In other words, everything important.

Well, you might be thinking, *being a parent is like that.* But it's not just my kids. This is the summer 18 years into my marriage that everything I say hurts my husband and everything he says hurts me. We misunderstand each other. Our words come out wrong or are taken wrong. Our tone is wrong, even if the words don't wound.

And when we stop talking, we descend into a terrifying hopelessness. Stay with me. This is relevant.

Two days ago, it was gently revealed to me that the three lectures I'd spent seven months researching and writing are too long, about too many things, simultaneously unfounded and overly informational, too personal and too impersonal, basically, failures [laugher].

Perhaps with work, says my editor, t*hese drafts could become essays*. So, to summarize, my math is wrong, my logic is wrong, my presence is wrong, my absence is wrong, my gender is wrong, insofar as I come from a mode of thinking in which I believe that gender is a real thing rather than a fluid social construct infinitely complicated and slippery.

Being male would make me more wrong, but being female is also wrong, and conflating gender with race or sexual preference is definitely wrong. My heterosexuality and Whiteness also make me wrong, *always*, *all the time*, in the sense that they confer unto me privileges at great cost to others, so that any "rightness" I have in the sense of power or agency is wrongly mine, and part of what makes me wrong in the world, and certainly part of what makes the world so *very, very* wrong.

At 43, I am too young and too old. Old people look at me wistfully, teenagers with disgust, and children with distrust [laughter]. Also, the whole world hates Americans, even if they want to be one.

Clearly, I am in the Hillary Clinton stage of my life. Everything about me makes someone extremely angry. *Who does she think she is?* Who do I think I am? And what does this have to do with poetry?

In this climate of *wrongness,* it is difficult to say anything. This isn't new. This is just more apparent to me than ever before. The volume of wrongness is turned up so high, it's impossible to ignore and difficult to shout over. To say anything, even to say I'm wrong, is wrong.

White people should listen. To be silent or meek and or apologetic is wrong. Women should be strong and assertive. And speaking of this climate, I am one of everyone who is irreparably destroying the environment. I am more wrong than my children can even imagine.

So, what woke me up in the middle of this night was the realization that all this wrongness is excruciating and is somehow exactly right and exactly what I need to talk about.

These last seven months, writing about photography, confessional poetry, and the ethical considerations of writing about real people, I was trying to build a case for my thinking and convince you that my ideas were right and interesting and worth your time. In this way, I'd abandoned what made me a poet and the very nature of my poetics.

I first started writing and still write poetry because the world and its people and ideas are wrong, insane, immoral, disappointing, and unimaginably terrible. I write because I feel wrong, sad, crazy, disappointed, disappointing, and unimaginably terrible. I write to expose wrongness and to confess wrongness and with a sense that doing so is futile at best and more likely part of wrongness and compounds wrongness.

[19:48]

I write *against*. Mine is a poetics of opposition and provocation that I never outgrew. Against wrongness, out of wrongness, with wrongness. Here's my current definition of a poet: I am wrong and you are wrong, and I'm willing to say it, therefore, I am a poet. [Laughter].

A poet is one who feels wrong in a wrong world and is willing to speak even when doing so, proves her own wrongness, ugliness, brokenness, complicity. This is not the same as saying that I write poetry to feel better, or to be forgiven, or that the goal of poetry is to write wrongs. Perhaps some people feel better when they write poetry. Perhaps some poems make the world less wrong.

What I'm trying to explain, though, is that the athleticism of poetry is the poet's ability to stay in and with wrongness. Of being willing to be disliked for being too smart and too stupid, too direct and incomprehensible, elitist and the lowest of the low, and all for what?

For the privilege of pointing out that everything in the world is wrong. Wrongness is intrinsic to poetry, which asserts with its most defining formal device, the line break, that the margins of prose are wrong, or with its attention to diction, that the ways in which we've come to understand and use words is wrong.

Maybe you think I'm wrong in the way I'm using the word wrong? Fine. I embrace it. I've never written to please you, even if I liked it when you were pleased.

I write to talk back, sometimes to myself, not to tell you what I think, but to *figure out* what I think, which is always a process of proving myself and others wrong.

It is the job of poems to undermine, to refute, retort, resee, disrupt, to tell you nicely or aggressively that you are wrong, that the world is fucked up, and that all our modes of understanding and expression are suspect, and that there is nothing and no one above reproach or scrutiny. Poets speak even when it is excruciating, even when no one is listening, often when the poet would be better off staying silent.

That's what a poem is; a breaking of silence. A form that makes and then breaks silence over and over. Poetry is the language of pain and grief and hurt and love, and most people in our country hate it, but often need it, and sometimes find solace and pleasure in it. I have learned from being a daughter and a mother that finding your parent wrong or being told how wrong you are is a complicated act of attachment, separation, individuation, and love.

A parasitic sort of love, perhaps, but love. In that it is a way of paying attention, of giving a shit. The alternative to being wrong is being ignored. So here are some assertions about poetry, offered in the mode of opposition, without apology, with complete certainty that you, audience, along with my sons, my friends, my students, the culture, the subculture, the past, the future, strangers and intimates, both living and dead, are sure to consider what follows, wrong.

Enjoy being in good company. Enjoy the brief pleasure of feeling that I am more wrong than you are.

Believe me, you are also wrong. [Laughter] Here are the six anti-tenants of the poetics of wrongness.

One, poetry should be beautiful.

John Keats is wrong. [Laughter]. Or, the Grecian urn is wrong when it says, *Beauty is truth, truth, beauty, that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.*

Mmmm no. First of all, to the extent that I even understand what beauty is, I distrust it and reject it as a quality poetry should pursue or attempt to embody. Beauty is not an inherent quality. It is rather the manipulation of a thing, a bettering

and idealizing of the ordinary and the real. By this logic then, beauty is not truth, at all, but closer to anti-truth.

My definition of beauty may be ahistorical. My beauty, a quality primarily invoked to make me buy something I don't need or believe something that isn't true, an industry sold primarily to women to make them make themselves different than they would naturally look, might not be Keats' beauty, just as I'm pretty sure my idea of truth was not, is not the same as his was.

Perhaps Keats or the Urn was referring to a beauty akin to the Greek notion of perfection, a just right proportion that already exists that waits to be identified rather than made, in which the circle might be the perfect shape or painting the perfect art. It's this kind of thinking that underlines Samuel Coleridge's famous delineation of prose and poetry.

[25:17]

I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry. That is, prose equals words in their best order. Poetry, the best words in the best order.

Best, perfect, beautiful. I have just as much trouble with perfection or "bestness" as I do with beauty. Perfection and beauty imply flawlessness, and flawlessness is an untruth.

Perhaps that's why the poem "To Dorothy" by Marvin Bell moves me.

[Reads "To Dorothy"]

The poetics of wrongness rejects flawlessness. Even the perfect metaphor breaks down in this poem. The poetics of wrongness is only interested in perfection as a manifestation of the Greek notion of teleios, or completeness, because completeness contains everything, including the wrongness of things, the flaws, the weeds, the inexact beauty of Dorothy, and the poet's desire to write his love for Dorothy, which is a necessary and necessarily failed inexact endeavor.

Even if we replace “beauty” with a notion of perfection or completeness that includes flaws, I still have a problem with Keats's construction. The relationship between teleios and truth is not a simple synonymous “is.” The relationship between beauty and truth is wildly complicated, complex, impossible to define.

For this reason, the Poetics of Wrongness likes to fester in this space, the filled with error space of the relationship between truth and beauty.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, a famous painter poet came to deliver a lecture. I remember him showing paintings of the crucifixion of Jesus and saying that all art is beautiful.

I raised my hand and I asked, “What if you wanted to make art that wasn't beautiful?” This famous poet-painter explained that one could make art of ugly, difficult content, but for the art to succeed, it would transcend ugliness and become beautiful.

Oh, teacher, I say you are wrong. I fight back. I reject. I too love the made and ache with appreciation at the well-made, but the poetics of wrongness rejects anything that suggests that poetry is a pursuit by which we take the ordinary and put makeup on it, make it better, make it best.

Even if it were possible, I am not aiming for alchemy. The notion that art is the rendering of the ordinary into the transcendent or extraordinary is *wrong*. I espouse instead the pursuit of truth, which includes wrongness, and what is-ness with an awareness that the pursuit of truth is inherently flawed and doomed to failure.

Two. Poetry should be slant.

Speaking of truth, here's another famous poet I'd like to contradict. “Tell all the truth,” but tell it slant, Emily Dickinson wrote, and she was wrong. [Laughter].

Actually, the people who interpreted her directive to mean that poets should intentionally try to make the truth more complicated than it is, *they* are wrong.

I prefer to read Dickinson's short poem as a wittier, quieter, but no less powerful version of Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* shouting, “You can't handle the truth!”

Tell all the truth, but tell it slant–/ Success in Circuit lies/ Too bright for our infirm Delight/ The Truth's superb surprise/ As Lightning to the Children eased/ With explanation kind/ The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind–

[30:06]

Dickinson's not saying “don't tell all the truth.” She's not even saying “don't tell all the truth at once.” She's saying that the truth, unmediated and given directly, will make men blind. I read Dickinson's use of the word *success* as containing a heavy dose of proto-irony.

Somehow though, in the line, “tell all the truth but tell it slant,” the word *slant* has been taken to mean that it is the poet's job to dole out truth in small doses or show the world in flashes or dimly illuminated, because telling a slant truth is kinder? Less blinding? Or maybe just more interesting.

This kind of thinking has been used to bolster a poetics of coyness and indirection that often slips into glibness, abstraction, and meaninglessness. It's hard enough to know if there is such a thing as truth. Don't waste your time trying to make it less clear, or sit there in the dark waiting for lightning to make things momentarily visible.

Be as clear as you can possibly be. Always. Blind me. I dare you.

The Poetics of Wrongness responds to slantness in Whitman's voice and with his words: *Now I wash the gum from your eyes. You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life* [Section 46, “Song of Myself”].

Three. A poem should be short.

Wrong! [Laughter]

A poem should be as long as it needs to be. The poems I love often brush up against the rules of form, then run roughshod over those rules, then turn around and spit in the face of those rules. It's not that a short poem is necessarily impossible, but I reject absolutely the notion that what makes a poem a poem is that it contains language that is best, see number one, or a thing of beauty made with language, see number one, or difficult, tricky, altered truth for the sake of inventiveness or kindness, see number two, or that what distinguishes poetry from other forms of language is brevity, concision, not an extra word in sight.

Here is a tiny, lovely poem by W. S. Merwin… which I have now lost. There we go.

[Reads "Separation"]

Here is another short poem, this one by Margaret Atwood, less sweet but also powerful:

[Reads "[you fit into me]"]

[Laughter]

And perhaps my favorite short poem, Poetry, by Marianne Moore.

[Reads "Poetry"]

The Poetics of Wrongness can accept these poems, which have a remarkable ability to surprise and confuse and contradict in a small space. Moore's contempt isn't perfect. It has a fault in which the appeal of poetry slips through. And here she has made this neat little space for the genuine in her poem, in part by contradicting herself and the implied world and their dislike for poetry of the first line. But shortness as a *goal*? That I reject.

I don't support Occam's razor or the law of parsimony. Poems are not problems to be solved with the fewest possible words. Length as a standard of measure for poetry is irrelevant. But if it matters at all, I would say that it is more difficult for

short poems to fulfill a poetics of wrongness. See how well-behaved these poems are that I just read you, how easily I can insert them into this lecture, how easily you can make that poetry sigh and move on? [Laughter]

They are portable, easily memorizable, they are digestible, and often feel pre-digested. And these are the good ones. Many short poems read to me as self-satisfied products of a mind that is condescending to me. The poet has chewed up the world and regurgitated it into my open beak. Get away from me, lyric poet of beauty and perfectness with your "it won't hurt a bit IV" through which you intend to painlessly insert the essence of something into my bloodstream.

Give me instead food with all its fiber. A whole disgusting moving worm and a pile of pebbles. The Poetics of Wrongness prefers real food, even if it makes me sick, even if I have to chew and chew and chew. The Poetics of Wrongness rejects a poetry that wants to be unobtrusive or invisible in its form.

[35:09]

The Poetics of Wrongness doesn't want a chiseled jewel, or a small purse of emotions recollected in tranquility. The Poetics of the Wrongness want the kind of poetry that Sylvia Plath said "at its best can do you a lot of harm."

Of course it can harm. "The blood jet is poetry. There is no stopping it," wrote Plath.

I want Bernadette Mayer's unwieldy, book-length, 150 page poem, *Midwinter Day*, that she supposedly, it is impossible, wrote all in one day, that travels from dreams to consciousness and back, that includes the voices of her children, her town, history, sex, what she eats for lunch, gossip, lines in Shakespearean meter, prose, and common lists.

[Reads Mayer].

How else can she begin to describe *accurately* the incoherence of the mind of life, being a woman, being alive? This poem is impossible and feels nearly unstoppable,

and she does it successfully by including her awareness of the inherent failure of the project.

“From dreams I made sentences, then what I've seen today, then past the past of afternoons of stories like memory, to seeing a plain introduction of modes of love and reason, then, to end, I guess, with love, a method to this winter season”--[Bernadette Mayer]

Instead of the Faberge egg of a short lyric, I prefer the aesthetics of intractability and exhaustive, exhaustedness, the physicality and ruptured rapture. The unapologetic plainspoken ness of James Schuyler’s long poems, for example, that are too long to be poems but are poems. His lines are too long for the page, too long to scan, too long to function as standalone lines, but they *are* poetry.

His tally of physical complaints, his observations about garbage trucks and air conditioners are anti-poetic and embraced and lauded by the poetics of wrongness. Or I want the book lengths tape… the book-length poem *Tape for the Turn of the Year* by AR Ammons in which he typed and later did not edit a poem that begins and ends at a lengths determined by a two-and-a-quarter inch wide roll of adding machine paper that would end up being 200 pages long.

Ammons loves and hates the roll of paper, adores and despises the project. The poem is so long that his back suffers. The project is like a long marriage and provides him ample opportunity to be wrong, to change his mind, find himself over and over again. It is epic and anti-epic.

Odysseus is a man trying to get home. Ammons is a man who almost never leaves home. He must continue the poem until the roll runs out. He is Penelope, at her loom, but never unweaving, and it is the moments that Ammons grows exasperated, exhausted, and bored that he comes upon exquisite language-making. Thank goodness he did not edit the poem down to the crucial plot points or the greatest collection of best lines.

It is the discursive, rambling journey of this poem and its many mistakes that is its glory. What do you get when you mix the pursuits of brevity and beauty?

Advertising. The motto, the jingle, the political slogan. A pitch that should take no longer than a ride in an elevator. The poetics of wrongness prefers the stairs.

[39:45]

Prefers a half-finished crumbling stairs to nowhere. The Poetics of Wrongness can't fit in an elevator, wouldn't know what button to press, doesn't know where it's going, suffers from a fear of elevators, and has forgotten its keys and wallet. [Laughter] The Poetics of Wrongness wants poems that are expansive, inclusive, contradictory, self-conscious, ashamed, and irreverent.

It's hard to be those things in 100 words or less. What, you might ask, is the advantage of this ongoingness, this going on and on this. “I don't have time for all this meandering,” you might say, “I find long-winded ness inconsiderate and annoying.”

Well, first of all, the poetics of wrongness prefers poems that some people worship and other people detest to poems that everyone likes. So your dislike does not worry me. Second, one note does not a music make. Third, the Poetics of Wrongness values process over product and longer poems are almost always more honest about their status as *made things* than short poems are.

I am not saying that longer is always better. The Poetics of Wrongness is not interested in who can eat the most hot dogs without throwing up or who can hold her breath underwater for the longest time. [Laughter]

The Poetics of Wrongness likes a good rant or jeremiad, but disdains the filibuster. It is not length for length's sake that I appreciate. Let's not hold *longness* up as the new *beauty.* A bad poem that goes on for a long time is surely worse than if it were quickly over. [Laughter]. It's not length that makes something good, but there is something about the presence of time in a poem that often pleases the poetics of wrongness, and something about the sleight of hand, refined, sublimed, edited nature of short poems that often makes the poetics of wrongness cringe.

The very long or book-length poems I've mentioned take time and are about time, and in the time that it takes to write these poems, the poet punches a time card in the time clock of the poem and begins to become real to the reader and to herself in a different way. There is space created by time.

Can you see my son rolling his eyes at my misuse of physics?

There is space created by time for the poet to inhabit and for the reader, too.

When one sees a painting by Jackson Pollock, one notices color and composition, of course, but the thrill of these paintings is the way in which the viewer sees a record of Pollock's body in motion, moving through time and space as he splattered or threw paint.

All made works are records of an artist's time, but some are more visible in the recording of this time or in the preoccupation with time. Some art goes to great lengths to pretend it emerged fully formed, like Athena from the leg of Zeus. The Poetics of Wrongness is not interested in art made by the gods, or by God, and gives no gold star for the illusion of effortlessness.

You say it is boring to watch a person sit in a chair, hour after hour, day after day, breathing in and out and in and out, taking breaks to eat and shit and make love and listen to the weather. You say this is not what art should be about or what art is for. The Poetics of Wrongness cares not for an absent God-artist we can't see or hear, but wants the living miracle of a real person in a real place at a real-time artist.

The Poetics of Wrongness says that art *is* these moments of repetition and recurrence and realness, and that in the time it takes to read such a long poem, in the experiential recognition of how long it took to *write* such a poem, the poet becomes real. With frustration and boredom and anger, with familiarity, adoration, and gratitude, the writer and reader get to spend time together.

The poem, violating the laws of time and space, Is their meeting place, the place where they become visible to one another and begin to have a relationship that is

both imaginary and real, full of faults and failure and desire. It is like sex and it is what all art, short or long, aspires to.

Four: Poetry should be timeless.

Speaking of time, the poetics of wrongness has a problem with *timelessness* as a virtue. A journalist once said to me, “Journalism is important to a large number of people for a very short period of time, whereas poetry is important to very few people for a potentially very long period of time.”

Okay, maybe.

But this does not necessarily lead to the widely held idea that a good poem should be timeless. I've already said that being full of time, visibly, audibly, palpably full of time can be an asset. And I know that timeless is not meant to imply without time. Most poems have some relationship to narrative and narrativity and cannot exist without time.

[45:03]

But the poetics of wrongness rejects timelessness and lastingness as an attribute, and suggests time*liness* as an alternative. The poetics of wrongness wants a poetry that is conscious of time, time-full, and that is of a particular time, timely, and that is relevant, timely. Some poems will last and continue to be relevant, but the Poetics of Wrongness wants a poem that is hard to capture and hard to hold.

The Poetics of Wrongness wants a poem that will *not* last forever because it is fresh, alive, unstable, potentially, hopefully, useful at a *now* moment because the poem is on its deathbed.

The Poetics of Wrongness is not afraid of hospice. Everything alive dies. Everything fresh expires. The Poetics of Wrongness wants poems with a shelf life, made of living ingredients.

The Poetics of Wrongness would like artists to rethink the idea that the purpose of making art is to make something that will outlive and outlast our minor mortal lives. Rethink the goal of making something that will endure. Rethink the virtue of timelessness.

Do you want to write a poem that will outlive you? That will last forever?

Really? Like plastic? [Laughter].

Toxic waste?

Five. Poetry should be universal.

One of the great long poems of all time is Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*. The Poetics of Wrongness embraces Whitman and his barbaric yawp, his multitudes, his, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself."

The relationality of the poem as it reaches out to the reader, its willingness to imagine its own demise, its insistence, its long-windedness. The Poetics of Wrongness loves Whitman's inclusiveness, his energy, his corporality, even his unbounded ego and passion.

But the Poetics of Wrongness rejects the way Whitman's love of everything has been used to espouse universality as a necessary quality in poems.

Here are the first three lines of *Song of Myself*:

I celebrate myself and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

Oh, the Poetics of Wrongness does wildly love this poem. But to say that Whitman's open-arms poetics, his democratic attention, makes him a universal everyman, writing for and to a universal everyman, is a misunderstanding of Whitman, just as needless indirection is a misunderstanding of Dickinson.

The poetics of wrongness is *deeply* suspicious of universality.

Let me stay instead with the specific, the particular, the peculiar, the personal, even if it means that I am accused of narcissism. It is just fine to look at myself if I am looking with attention and with scrutiny. And often, it is not myself I gaze at in the still pool, but rather you, the other, *an* other, and the world with all its wrongness.

Even if your atoms and mine are remarkably similar, even if we are all made up of what everything in the cosmos is made up of, let me *not* assume I know you. Or worse, that I am you.

"Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted," wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley. The poetics of wrongness would like to try to describe the distorted and the distortion without making it beautiful.

"Pain is filtered in a poem so that it becomes finally in the end pleasure," wrote Mark Strand. The poetics of wrongness would like a pain that stays pain. Not because this is a poetics of sadomasochism, although the poetics of wrongness has no problem with sadomasochism, but because it is a poetics of what *is*-ness, not *what would be niceness*.

The Poetics of Wrongness rails against the way in which universalism is often used as a way of excluding certain subject matters or tones or bodies from poetry. The way encouraging poets to write about common experiences that everyone often has, that everyone has, often has the opposite effect of leading to a poetry that is certainly, that is only about certain, often male, often White, often heterosexual, often normative experiences that according to straight White men are universal.

[50:00]

The Poetics of Wrongness prefers instead to write with the parts of our brains and hearts and souls and emotions that are broken and disrupted. To write out of our fetishes and aphasias, the way Chuck Close, who is face-blind, has spent a lifetime making portraits. The Poetics of Wrongness suggests that it is in the specific,

honest portrayal of our most peculiar, obscene, esoteric qualities that one will provoke empathy and identification.

Here is Philip Roth, a writer full of wrongness, in “American Pastoral”:

“You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance. As equals, man to man, as we used to say, and yet you never fail to get them wrong. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them, you get them wrong while you're with them, and then you go home and tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them, as with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion, empty of all perception, an astonishing farce of misperception. And yet, what are we to do about this terribly significant business of other people? Which gets bled of the significance we think it has, and takes on, instead, a significance that is ludicrous, so ill-equipped are we to envision one another's interior workings and invisible aims. Is everyone to go off and lock the door and sit secluded like the lonely writers do in a soundproof self-cell, summoning people out of words and then proposing that these word-people are closer to the real thing than the real people that we mangle every day with our ignorance? The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's about getting them wrong that is living. Getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive. We're wrong.”

Yes, I say yes to that.

The Poetics of Wrongness knows that summoning people out of words and mangling real people with words is always an act of getting them wrong.

Our word people are no more or less wrong than real people and as writers we should try to be at least as alive and wrong in our writing as we are in our real lives. Even if we are able to rescue universality from its highly problematic history, its tendency to mean “majority” or “mainstream” when it says “common,” even if

we were able to appreciate the good-hearted social utopianism that motivates liberal notions of universality, I still reject it.

The Poetics of Wrongness rejects the notion that poetry should have a restorative effect on the world. And the Poetics of Wrongness rejects the idea that presenting an idealized, utopian view of the world will have a restorative effect on the individual or the collective. This vision of the artist as creating an act of tzimtzum, in which she or he finds the shattered pieces of the once perfect, whole, divine, and gathers and restores them, is offensive to the poetics of wrongness.

I believe that there are universal feelings, qualities, experiences, but I do not believe that foregrounding our commonalities rather than our differences will lead to better poetry or will result in us treating each other less poorly. Writing out of the universal is often confused with writing for the everyman, which can too often be kind a kind of lowest common denominator poetics.

In this way, deeply underestimating the intelligence of every man. Or a sort of total abstraction that renders everyone equally estranged from meaning. Notions that we are all created equal, that women can do anything men can do, that really we're all the same, and other liberal, well-intentioned fantasies have not kept us from killing each other.

We see difference, and we act on difference. Let us at least admit it, and return to a particularity in a relational context, an “I” that is singular, but always reaching out to you, and you, and you. The “I” of Alice Notley, who the Poetics of Wrongness does worship. Here is the end of her long poem, *The Prophet*:

“Do not generally go about giving advice. That which is everybody's business is nobody's business. Let thyself become undeceived through the beauty and strangeness of the physical world. It is almost possible to believe that if you look at it, really see it, be it for yourself, you will be free. They say it will be cloudy tomorrow, but they are often wrong. There is a lot to say about two and one. Your life is not small or mean. It is beautiful and big, full of planets, clouds, sky, and also your tiniest things of you. One is you, and all this, and two, and yet. You must never stop making jokes. You are not great. You are life.”

[55:41]

Six. Poetry is close to godliness.

The Poetics of Wrongness is anthropocentric. It is written by human beings, for human beings, and about human beings. It is interested in the divine and nature as seen and experienced through the human senses and intellect. In its preference for the literal, for the direct, for the domestic, for the political, for the relational, for the sociological, for the individual, it can be perceived as atheist.

This is not necessarily the case. The Poetics of Wrongness knows that ideology is a petri dish for wrongness. The Poetics of Wrongness is foundationally anti-fundamentalist, while recognizing, of course, that being anti-anything can easily develop into fundamentalism. The Poetics of Wrongness recognizes prayer as an ancient and enduring form of writing out of wrongness, both external and internal.

The Poetics of Wrongness loves the impossibility of monotheism, but only for its impossibility, and for the ways in which it reveals the fragility and pathos and imagination and terror of humankind. The Poetics of Wrongness knows that whomever and whatever and however created the world, it wasn't by mine own hand, and I have only the power to name and love and suffer and die.

If the Poetics of Wrongness believes in any god, it is the god of human failure; a god imagined to make visible in us all that is ungodly. That is, doubt, weakness, fear, ineptitude, physicality, and mortality. The Poetics of Wrongness is interested in getting close to God, or beauty, or perfection, only insofar as the journey reveals the inherent and absolute failure of our inevitable reaching.

As Whitman said, “Why should I wish to see God better than this day? I see something of God each hour of the 24 and each moment then in the faces of men and women I see God and in my own face in the glass I find letters from God dropped in the street and everyone is signed by God's name and I leave them where they are for I know that wheresoever I go others will punctually come forever and ever.”

Or, they will not.

Perhaps we will finally destroy the world, in which case let us be thankful that we made poetry and had poetry while we still had eyes to read.

It is by misunderstanding these poets and these ideas about poetry and feeling misunderstood by them that I have come to have the courage and energy to say anything at all.

I've spent most of my life figuring out who I want to be by figuring out how to be unlike and like my mother. I watch my sons come into adulthood by wanting to do everything their own way, which arises out of an awareness of *my* wrongness, *my* insufficiency, which arises out of their awareness of who I am, or who they think I am.

My husband and I hurt each other as we struggle to see each other as separate but connected. Human babies are astonishingly dependent and remain so for an impossibly long period of time. It is remarkable how long it takes for infants to perceive that they are not one with the universe, not at one with the face that is hopefully staring back at them with love.

Oppositionality is not an act of violence or hatred to the one opposed. ”Poetry,” wrote Allen Ginsberg, “is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night lying in bed thinking what you really think, making the private world public. That's what the poet does.” The poetics of wrongness agrees.

Part of knowing what I think, is knowing what I do not agree with, saying *no* to the party line and making our private disagreements public? Yes, that's what the poet does.

[1:00:04]

“What if there were no more party line?” I wrote [laughter].

Would poetry cease to exist? Cease to be necessary?

I say that such an age of agreement and sameness and rightness will never come to be. And that poetry will therefore always be necessary. I would love to be proven wrong.

Um, so just a, just a tiny little thing, which is, Where are we now?

I fear that we've entered an age of wrongness, unlike anything that has come before. Or, that White people, straight people, especially straight White people, especially straight White men, have suddenly come to realize how wrong and fucked up this country and daily life has *always* been for marginalized people and people from underrepresented groups.

Either way, we are in trouble. And... I think that even the people who are happy with the outcome of this election are in trouble.

Uh, so the first thing I would do to change this lecture is to add another anti-tenant. Um, it would be seven: Poetry should be apolitical.

Um, Poetry can and should and perhaps always is political.

I don't know about that yet. I need to think that through.

Um, but especially the Poetics of Wrongness believes that poetry *has* to be political. And I will say that I've seen so many poems uh, in the past few days shared on public, on social media more than I've ever seen, um, before. We have a new need for poetry and I would *not* choose this outcome for anything, I'm not saying that, but I do suspect that some very good art and especially some very good poems are about to be written. I don't think these poems are worth the lives and freedom, um, but the poems might help us find solace and more important, perhaps it will be part of what will call us to action.

Thank you.

[applause]

[1:02:18]

END OF LECTURE

ELLEN WELKER: That was Rachel Zucker giving her talk, “The Poetics of Wrongness: an Unapologia.” The Bagley Wright Lecture Series is a nonprofit that supports contemporary poets as they explore, in depth, their own thinking poetics and give a series of lectures resulting from these investigations. Lectures are delivered publicly in partnership with institutions and organizations nationwide.

[music]

[1:02:56]

AFTERWORD

RACHEL ZUCKER: Alright, so a lot of things have changed since I wrote that first lecture. Yeah. What has not changed is that there are a lot of interruptions in my life. But, um, there had not been a Trump presidency. Um, the reason that we're sort of rushing this is because you're going with your dad. When I wrote the lecture, Josh and I were married.

And very obviously, how old were you then?

MOSES: I think that was eight years ago. So I was Judah’s age,

RACHEL ZUCKER:Right? The difference between being 15 and 23 is yeah, it's huge. It feels really big.

MOSES: Yeah. Yeah it does feel reading it sometimes like I'm looking back for clues about what my life was like at that time? Which is sort of it's weird to have this kind of record of that and always reading… your work, there's the sense of you rushing, like hiding away in the middle of the night to be able to do it. [Laughter].

Um, is that still what your writing is like?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Kind of, I guess. I mean, now I have these periods of time where you and Abram are not living with me and Judah is with dad. So, I do, for the first time in my writing life, have some more alone time, whereas it used to be that the only time I really had that was when I would travel, or when I would, you know, specifically go on retreat. And that's when I wrote this lecture. I was staying at, um, Aaron's house, usually once a year I would try to go, um, out there and, and, uh, I would write, like, sort of do damage to my own brain by writing, you know, and working for like 12 hours a day, three days in a row. Do you have a lot of memories of me like in the room with the door closed being like, “I'm writing!”?

[1:05:12]

MOSES: No, no, basically none.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. And I, I don't really know what to make of that fully. Like I have so many memories of my mom doing that and being like, “You can't make any noise. You know, I'm rehearsing.” Maybe I… Could have done a better or should have done a better job like Making that part of the family… like I only really felt like I had a “job” when I was teaching, but I don't feel that the writing part of my life was ever… considered there was no the family didn't really make space for that.

MOSES: Uh huh. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: The, the, the lecture in the, in the book about the poetics of motherhood I think is much more about that and much more about being interrupted, um, being interruptible. And this one I think is, is kind of, um, I mean it starts with my lived experience as being the, and, and, and in particular being a wife and a mother.

And feeling wrong all the time. Um, I mean you can see it with Judah now, that he's the age that you were then.

MOSES: Yeah. He's, he really is, enjoys very much contradicting you at any chance he gets.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. And so I don't, you know, that idea of wrongness, which now, um, especially having been to the retreat with you and listening to Jack Kornfield and, and listening to so much Pema Chodron lately, I've thought about whether wrong...

MOSES: Have you been talking about that on the podcast?

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, not hardly at all. Um... but I've been thinking a lot about whether I sort of reinvented in my, for my*self*, um, the concept of uncertainty… and, not the concept of uncertainty, but the, the practice of sitting with uncertainty rather than trying to fix it. The basically a meditative approach to wrongness, um, and whether actually now that I know what I know, you know, now that I've listened to Pema Chodron say it all better, whether I'm like, "Oh, great job Jewish girl. You just, you know, you, you, you rejected Christianity, but you didn't get to Buddhism in this book." [Laughter].

So I don't know. I mean, one of the things that's changed for me, I think since writing that chapter is, and we were talking about this a little bit before about the part about godliness and my aversion, not to spirituality… in its entirety, but like sort of my commitment to anti-fundamentalism and to, which I think I connected too much to secularism. I think that was part of, I think your dad is very committed to secularism and I don't think I ever was. Um, but that was like, you know, when you're in a marriage, especially a long marriage with someone, you have to… you know, there's certain...

MOSES: Grow into each other.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You grow into each other. And so I wanted a synagogue where there was a lot of singing, and Dad really didn't. And Dad wanted a synagogue with a really smart rabbi who would do a lot of textual analysis, and I was interested in that. But um, as happened to my parents when they got divorced, I find myself becoming more and more spiritual, and really… not only not minding the kind of overt structure or mention or belief in God either through AA and 12-step programs or through the practice of meditation and mindfulness.

MOSES: Well I was gonna ask you about this, I didn't know if I was gonna ask you during this recording, but the, I mean it feels like the value that runs through all of the he anti-tenants is that poetry has to be inclusive enough of all kinds of different contradictory and unpleasant and confusing things. It's, it's really important to you not to let any of those pieces go.

[1:10:06]

RACHEL ZUCKER: [to off-audio child] Mm hmm. Moses and I are just recording something. Could you give us a little bit? Okay, what do you need?

CHILD: Uh, uh, a, a [indecipherable]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, in the front door, between the two doors. You can take as many as you want. Awesome. Thank you.

MOSES: Yeah. Really inclusive of every difficult and fucked up thing, clearly motivated by difficult, emotional, distressed experiences that you're going through. Um, and I think you say somewhere like, and it's also not really supposed to help? It's like not supposed to, get rid of those things or or like even tie a ribbon around them. My words you would have said something better than that but but that that reminds me very much of a sort of idea of radical acceptance that that might show up in one of these one of these retreat spaces that we're we're now exploring.

And really the, the idea that like really radical acceptance is like, the more radical the acceptance, like maybe the less it will, the less it will help you [laughs].

Like if you're expecting it to be too helpful, maybe it's not so radical.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I think I'm looking in, in the whole book. I mean, there's, there's a lot of ways to like simplify the whole book, right? And there's, you could say like, okay, the whole book is, is an attempt. to explain to my mother why I thought it was okay to, uh, you know, write about her and publish a book that had so much about her without her consent.

And so, like, how to, what that kind of wrongness is, right? Um, I think that's only one of many ways, to like oversimplify what the book is about, you know, and then the, the, the, the two next chapters really go into how, what are the ethics about representing real people in art, um, in the history of confessional poetry, and I, I think a lot about photography and portraiture and, and consent and, you know, all of these kinds of questions. Um, I'm struggling with how to be…

MOSES: the dog is pawing a pot just to make the sound so that we'll hear it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, she's so annoying. Go lie down. Go lie down.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say in too many words is I don't like this idea of poetry as rarefied, beautiful language, that doesn't include

[dog bark]

RACHEL: What? [Laughter]. I mean, how can you do this to me? I feed you.

Okay, so I don't like this idea of like fancy poetry that… [dog barks] Jesus Christ. [Laughter].

I don't like the idea that poetry is... in some way, the place where we "fix" the language, or where we present the best, most beautiful, most, you know, metrically perfect kind of language, right? I want poetry and the poetry that I love is this place of radical acceptance, radical inclusivity, mess, disorder, um, real life.

The interruptions of the dog and the children and, you know, so I… I wasn't the kind of mother, I'm not the kind of mother, obviously, who manages to have uninterrupted, quiet workspace and time from you and your brothers, or now from the dog [laughs]. And that's the way that I've lived my life, and I do feel that there's something worthwhile about recording my life with all of its interruptions and not pretending that it was other than it is.

And I think that's a poetics, that's a fundamental poetics for me. That said, like, I don't necessarily want somebody to have to hear the dog barking constantly. Um,

or the equivalent of that. And so, *of course* I make decisions about what to put in and what to take out and how to shape it into something that's pleasing to me, beautiful to me. So, but once I start doing that, there are all sorts of ethical problems. Like, I don't know how to tell the story of *my* life without including you, your brothers, your dad, um, you know, things that people… that you might not want people to know things that other people don't want to know about me, things about my body, mental illness, like all kinds of stuff like that.

[1:15:20]

And my mother… um, so that gets super complicated. And I think this… to come back to this idea about godliness.

Now the dog is chewing on a bone, which I totally can hear on the… on the recording. If I take it away from her, she'll bark.

I, I was gonna say some smart thing about basic goodness and spirituality, but this is just so perfect [laughter].

Like, I, I don't know what smart thing I was trying to say, but like the dog is chewing on a bone and that's, and we don't really have time to put the mics in the other room, so I don't know.

MOSES: We have time.

RACHEL ZUCKER: We don't, cuz dad is coming and he's gonna be pissed f you're not ready to go [laughter]. This is exactly my life. If this is a director's cut of this audio and now it's March of 2023… I guess two questions one is, reading this do you recognize me in it?

MOSES: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah for sure, right? I'm interested in what you I think is, is different about your approach now versus then, but it feels very.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I, I think once Trump was elected, I got anxious about being a proponent of wrongness. I like wanted to be like, yeah, not *that* kind of wrongness. That's bad. That's just *badness*.

My poetics comes out of… wanting to abide in wrongness, but not in evil or harm. Those are two really different, you know, those are all really different things.

MOSES: It's, it's interesting to me that you keep using Trump's election as like the, the example of the, the before and after. Um, and I think you just did sort of answer this question, but I, I, I'm interested to hear more about how, how that changed either your, your approach to your work or whether you felt like your, your work became sort of differently suited or ill-suited to the world around you? Um, yeah, that's, that's one question.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, not long after Trump's election, it became clear that sort of the shock that I felt was gendered and raced. And so, you know, I want to kind of acknowledge that as well, that, I mean, I, I *promised* you that Trump could not and would not win. And, you know, what I really failed to understand was it wasn't just Trump. You know, I just, I was living to some extent in a fantasy world.

I think that it really, it felt like a crisis of faith for me. Um, in my belief in the basic goodness of living beings. I still, I'm coming back, not, not because of Biden [laughs], but any stretch of the imagination, but I'm coming back. I still believe in the basic goodness… of, of, of people.

One of the most difficult things in my life as a mom has been to try to be honest with you and your brothers and open about the dangers of the world and the shortcomings of people and the complexity and, and to welcome in a full range of emotions, not to deny… you know, historical evil. Um, but to really like be open, be honest. Um, but at the same time, I feel like part of what it is to be a good parent and a good mother is to give your children a sense of the world as a, as a good place.

And I think that, um, both because of what I felt Trump represented, and because of how many people voted for him, I lost my own faith that I could, that I wasn't lying to you.

And then I think *you* had a profound crisis.

MOSES: Well, I mean, I'm just thinking, it's, it's, there have been, there was, that was definitely a really profound shift in, in my and your and everyone's… way of thinking about the world at that point. Um, and there have been major shifts for me since then that I, that I, my sense is a lot of people are on a sort of similar trajectory.

[1:20:14]

I mean, the, the way that, that it seems most related to the poetics of wrongness is, there was a period of really high emotionally stakes feeling discomfort with disagreement ,like that it was an all-out war and people who didn't Know how wrong and behind they were even if they were agreed with you on 90% of things were like, that was really dangerous… and obviously you can tell from the way I'm describing it that I have a much harder time feeling that way now which I think has to do with we've all been living on the internet and it's pretty it's pretty ridiculous on there at the idea that everyone all believing the right thing is, is helping anyone.

And I also went to college, which is a lot like the internet in a lot of ways [laughter] um, in, in that, in that specific way of it being really unclear what, how people's correct beliefs are, are translating into anything good for the world. I don't, I don't know. Does, does that resonate with you?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, it also occurs to me thinking about it, like, I do think that, that the election of Trump was the first time that there was a certain kind of power shift between us - you and me - in the sense that, um, it's not like I'd never been wrong before. I, I've been wrong so many times. And, you know, I say that even in the chapter, like, you know, I, I really appreciate that you and your brothers help me have a much more complex and thoughtful view of politics and music and morality and all these things. And you've been doing that, you know, for me and

with me since you were *very* young, first by the questions that you asked and then, you know, by learning things in ways that I didn't… I wasn't taught in school and, and coming to your own practices and beliefs, and I've learned so much from you, but there's something about that moment, you and Abram really said to me, Trump is going to win.

And I was like, no, you guys are kids. You don't know anything. You don't know this. Like you don't just trust me, trust me, trust me, trust me. And not only did he win, but it was worse than I could have imagined. I really see that there was so much that I was naive about in what I imagined, you know, a Hillary presidency would be.

I acknowledge that now. At the time, I did not have, like, an awareness. I just so wanted there to be, you know, a mother president, and a woman president, and I, and I did not understand the things I understand now more thoughtfully about, you know, the Clintons and representationality as being a trap, um, in a lot of ways.

But I think, and I don't think it's true that, you know, your difficulties started with, with…Trump I don't think it's true that Abrams, you know, lack of, you know, belief in a future, ina viable future started with Trump's election, but it *felt* like that. And I think that it felt like that. It felt like *I cannot protect my children from the violence and cruelty of the world.*

And in fact, my desire to have you believe that there is goodness is somehow complicit with White supremacy in some kind of weird way. Like anything I try to say to you other than the world is a terrible place, is some kind of act of oppression. That's what it felt like at the time. And so it felt like the end of motherhood. It felt like the end of sanity. It felt like the end of like, it was a very different way of being wrong. Let's say that.

[1:24:51]

MOSES: Well, this is, I mean, just, just cut this if this is, it's, it's funny because… you know, maybe if we were having this conversation two or three or four years ago, I would have latched on to the politics much more. Um, but the detail that I

latched on to, and it's because I've been meaning to ask you about this, definitely not while we're recording [laughter] is, um, some line about that was, that was the summer that Josh and I couldn't agree on it or say, you know, this just as sort of, uh, quick description of all these fights and disagreement and, and, uh, not being able to escape that.

And, and, and I, I wonder sort of personally whether maybe for the whole family that was having also an impact on everyone's ability to believe in a happy, good world. Um, and that maybe that sort of became obscured by the politics at some point.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, I don't know which is a symptom and a cause. Um, and it's probably a lot more correlation than causation. Um, But, you know, there were a lot of articles that came out, um, like a year or two into Trump's presidency about how many divorces were happening and how many sort of like, sorry, *heterosexual* divorces were happening. I had been living the only woman in a house of four men, um, for a long time. I'd been in a heterosexual marriage.

I'd… Lived in a patriarchal, you know, world, but something happened for me around Trump's election. And then just maybe the coincidence of giving these lectures in the lead up to, to the election. And, and the experience of writing what felt like a much more weighty, intellectual work. Um, which I think was your dad's domain much more than mine.

And, you know, and the experience of going into the world and giving these lectures and being taken very seriously and coming home and being the mom. There was something that came up for me in, in, in that, and that came up between me and dad and that, but I think you're right. I don't know whether the fault lines that were already widening in the marriage were part of why, part of the underpinnings of *The Poetics of Wrongness.*

So, you know, which causes which. I mean, I think You could read this book, not you in particular, but one could read this book as the story of my divorce, um, or the end, the end of my marriage, you know, because I think that what I'm trying to

do is push back against what I see and feel as are the constraints on me and trying to figure out what kind of power I want to go after?

What kind of power do I want to just, you know, have nothing to do with?

How do I get up and even give a lecture when the entire form of the lecture itself feels antithetical to the way that I was parenting and you know, teaching and like living in the world, right?

Like, it's almost like there's, there's *lecturer* and then there's *doula* and the doula is the person who is present and respectful and holds the space and helps the other person bring life into the world, but is *not* the one with all the power in the room.

Whereas a lecturer is like, I'm going to, you know, impose my views on you. So, so something was happening for me and between me and dad, and between me and the patriarchy and, and you and your brothers were becoming men. I think that also had, you know, like it was given unto me to have male children. And that has been a joy and a pleasure and an education and like a completely bizarre experience!

[1:29:51]

MOSES: Um, did, did, can you, maybe you've spoken about this in other places. Can you talk more about like, are the, are the lectures, uh, are the lectures a different gender than your poetry? Like, are they, did it, did it actually feel like a different kind of power to be in that position? Maybe I'm conflating those two things.

RACHEL: [sighs] Oh that’s a good question. No, I know I think it's, I think it's super, super interesting. I mean, that's such an interesting question. I mean, you know, I'm thinking about the photography lecture, which didn't end up in the book, in part because it became so long that it just couldn't be in there. But I only gave that lecture once, and I gave it at Yale. Um, I really hated my experiences, I mean, I had a lot of important experiences at Yale, but I hated the institution and did not fit in well to the institution.

And a lot of what that lecture was about was about why I wasn't an English major at Yale, and the conservatism, um, of, the education, the administration, the curriculum design, the idea of what an English department is. Your dad was an English major at Yale. And so I really, you know, thought about photography, which was my way into poetry.

Um, there was no creative writing major at Yale, um, at that point. And you couldn't really study contemporary poetry. You know, and this, this happened, I think, in part with um, Judah's birth, and becoming a birth activist and a doula and a home birth activist. Like I started to really question all of the institutions that I'd ever been part of… I started, when I gave that lecture, I went back through my transcript and I counted up how many female professors I'd had, how many male professors I'd had. I mean, it was absurd.

And so I really, I just, you know, the word that I'm thinking of is "bridal," but like, I hate using that word, right? Like, I, you know, first of all, the homonym of bridle and bridal, but also like, what am I, a horse with a bit in my mouth?

MOSES: I didn't even know which one you meant.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, yeah, I mean like, I'm bridling at, you know, the expectations on me, and I think the expectations on me were, and I've told you this story, like, you know, about a year after I graduated from Yale, I ran, I was with my dad and I ran into a friend of his and, um, he, you know, found out that I'd gone to Yale and he said, Oh, did you get your MRS?

MOSES: Ew.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, so I was right at this moment where like that was some a lot of men's expectations of like why someone like me would go to Yale, and then I went to Iowa which was in some ways a continuation of that kind of like insider type of education, which I had as you know, *really* do not admire anymore.

In fact, I find it, like, exploitative, extractive, like, not the way I want to teach, not the way I want to live, you know, not the person that I want to be, not the source of

my power, not the source of my creativity, not the source of my goodness. So I think... What was the question again? [Laughs].

MOSES: Well, do the lectures stand maybe closer to some of those forms than your poetry does?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, right. Yeah.

MOSES: I definitely read in the lectures that you, that your poetics are there, for sure.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, right. I don't know how much of becoming a poet, as opposed to a professor, a critic, Um, I mean, I guess this is a book of criticism? I can't even really say that with a straight face, right? I don't know how much of becoming a poet was a way of sidestepping that kind of, I think abuse of power that everybody I know who is a literary critic exerts on their reader or their audience.

So when I was offered the job to write these lectures, and I was *paid*, I'd never been paid to write anything, you know, maybe I'd like gotten a little money, but like I was paid in *advance* to write these, you know, like that felt like a kind of, um, status and… maleness for lack of a better word, and power, and kind of like my chance to prove myself.

I mean, I think that's partly why I went to Yale, like I knew I was gonna be incredibly unhappy there. But I really wanted to show… myself? My dad? The world? How smart I was? I don't know, something, and the lectures activated all of that and I think I was like, how am I going to do a good job giving these lectures? Because I always want to do a good job and stay true to my beliefs, which are anti-hierarchical or nonhierarchical.

And I didn't know when I started how to give a lecture that was a conversation like we're having now. And I think like that's the highest form for me, is conversation, even higher than the poem. But the poem is the place that *I* feel like I can get closest to conversation. I think I think especially in this first lecture, what you're

seeing isnot just me struggling with, “What do I think poetry is,” but, “ How am I going to give a lecture that is in line with my belief system?”

[1:36:00]

MOSES. Yeah! Interesting.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Your dad's here.

MOSES: He is. Okay.

RACHEL ZUCKER: We should stop.

MOSES: Okay. Should we start again later?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

[Music]

This has been episode one of a five-episode sub-series of Commonplace. Many thanks to Erin Murray Mara, to Moses Zucker Goren, to Heidi Broadhead, to Ellen Welker, to everyone at Wave Books, to all the people who came to hear my lectures live and asked questions or blessed me with their silent presence of listening. Thank you to *all* the listeners of Commonplace and to *all* the former guests of Commonplace, to *all* the patrons of Commonplace.

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Thank you to everyone who will one day purchase the book and read it and maybe write to me.

You are listening to a song tentatively titled, “Another Beautiful Thing” by Moses Zuker-Goren. My deep thanks to my son for allowing me to use this song, even though, and because, it is not a finished song, even though it is a draft. Nothing gives me more pleasure in life than hearing my sons play music and hearing the music that they compose.

I don't want it to be perfect. It is a source of transcendent joy for me. It is the sound of aliveness, awakeness, connectedness, of sanity, of a human being expressing themselves. Thank you, Moses, for your courage in allowing me to use your unfinished music to accompany this unfinished, ongoing process of thinking about poetry and poetics and wrongness.

[Music]