COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE #117

Guest(s): Safia Elhillo & Charif Shanahan

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RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello and welcome to Episode 117 of Commonplace. I'm Rachel Zucker, founder and usually your host. Today, you're going to hear a wonderful conversation between Charif Shanahan, Safia Elhillo, and Isaac Ginsberg Miller.

Isaac Ginsberg Miller is a PhD candidate in Black Studies at Northwestern University, where he is also a member of the Poetry and Poetics graduate cluster. His chapbook, *Stopgap*, won the Sow's Ear Poetry Review Chapbook Contest and was published in 2019.

I've known Isaac for almost 10 years. I had the privilege of being Isaac's teacher and thesis advisor when he was getting his MFA at NYU. We kept in touch and became friends. Isaac was one of my primary readers and editors, which is also to say my teacher, when I was working on the lectures that became the book, *The Poetics of Wrongness*. And even though this is the first time you'll be hearing Isaac's voice on the podcast, he's been a friend of Commonplace for a long time. He's suggested poets for me to read and talk to, and offered invaluable feedback on

many episodes. I tried to record a short conversation with Isaac to use as the intro to this episode, but Ginsberg, my dog, kept barking, and as usual, Isaac and I got so deeply into our conversation that before I realized it, we'd recorded for well over an hour.

One day Isaac and I will record a conversation for Commonplace about our relationship and our thoughts and feelings about poetry, but this episode is about Charif and Safia - their books, their poems, their friendship, and I don't want to keep you from the beauty and power of their words and Isaac's generous, thoughtful questions.

Safia Elhillo is Sudanese by way of Washington, D. C. She is the author of *The January Children*, *Girls That Never Die*, and a novel in verse, *Home is Not a Country*. With Fatima Asghar, she is the co editor of the anthology *Halal If You Hear Me*.

Charif Shanahan is the author of *Trace Evidence: Poems*, which was long listed for the National Book Award for Poetry, and *Into Each Room We Enter Without Knowing*, which was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry and the Publishing Triangle's Tom Gunn Award. He is an assistant professor of English and creative writing at Northwestern University.

For this episode, some members of the Commonplace Book Club will receive a copy of *The January Children* by Safiya Elhillo, courtesy of University of Nebraska Press, or *Girls That Never Die*, also by Safiya Elhillo, courtesy of One World, or *Trace Evidence: Poems* by Charif Shanahan, courtesy of Tin House, or a signed copy of *Stopgap* by Isaac Ginsberg Miller, courtesy of the author. All Patrons will get access to audio files of Charif and Safia reading a few of their incredible poems, some of which they talk about in this episode.

For this episode, Commonplace's charitable partner will donate $300 to Āina Momona, "a Native Hawaiian nonprofit dedicated to achieving environmental health and sustainability through restoring social justice and de-occupying Hawaiian lands."

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Enjoy this episode. Be safe. Take care.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Okay. So just getting started here. Uh, how are you both doing today?

SAFIA ELHILLO: Good. Um, I got my copy of Charif's book in the mail yesterday, so I've been reading it all morning.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: [Laughs] That makes me really happy. Um, I'm, I'm good too. It's exciting to see the book getting out into the world and into the hands of people.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: So amazing. Well, it's a terrific book and I'm excited for it to be in more hands. I was wondering maybe if we could begin there. I mean, I think it's really striking to me that I think, as I mentioned by email, both of you are releasing books within a year of each other. And then also your first collections also came out the same year, 2017.

And so I feel like there's, you know, somewhat of a parallel journey that you're on, uh, as poets. And I wonder if you'd be willing to, to say a little bit about that, uh, both Charif, as you're releasing your second collection, Safia, um, you know, a year out from releasing your second collection, you know, how that journey has been, uh, of, of putting that out into the world.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: You want to take that, Safia?

[4:55]

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah. You know, I, so much of being a poet for me is like the whole point of the thing is just being a poet in community with other poets or like a poet among other poets. Charif and I met my first year at Cave Canem, which I believe was Charif's second year. You know, I already up until that point had the sense of like, the reason I want to be a poet and continue to be a poet is just to like get to hang out with other poets, but it really wasn't until I encountered Charif's work in workshop for the first time, and you know, Charif and I, like, on paper occupy pretty similar intersections, but the nuances account for a difference. Charif's people are from Morocco, mine are from Sudan, but still up until that point, that was like there was an exactness to the way that Charif's poems articulated something that I had not yet quite figured out how to say, like, about my own self and my own body and, um, the conversations that I was having, like, with myself and with my family around just, you know, what words to assign to kind of more nebulous ideas around race that didn't quite fit into the like stark and basic vocabulary that uh, most of the world has for race, America like, being kind of the biggest perpetrator of that.

And so to sit and read Charif's poems was like, it was such an electric feeling to be like, *Oh my God, wait a second, me too!* You know? Um, and I hadn't really up until that point gotten to have that feeling at all in my poetry writing life or in my poetry reading life because, um, you know, one of the symptoms of my like diaspora shit is that I my, like, lack of literacy in Arabic kind of cuts me off from a lot of what could be my, like, ancestry and my kin.

And so to, within this kind of, like, lonely English language space, to find a poet whose experiences came so close to my own. It was like finding, like, my long lost sibling or something. Charif has felt like my kin from the beginning, and so I think our books, like, you know, have no choice but to be, like, cousins, you know?

CHARIF SHANAHAN: [Laughs]. They are cousins. It's really, it's really moving to hear you say all of that, Safia, and, you know, I've, I've heard some version of, of all of that before in our friendship, and, you know, we've been... asked about the relationship between our, our work before and, you know, I think what I, what I want to say is, so the, the other side of that experience of, you know, being at Cave Canem for the first time, for the first time for her in my second year, but being

there for the first time together was that there was this sense of acute isolation that I had had you know, not only as a poet, but as an individual coming up, you know, navigating identity categories and structures that didn't exactly account for me and no name or language really, um, accounting for all of me or feeling accurate, you know, and the set of circumstances, the kind of cultural inheritance, the countries or region of origin, you know, um, that led to the circumstances of my unnameability, of my kind of placeless less or nowhereness, um, were a set of circumstances that I shared with exactly two other people who are my brothers, and and no one else [laughs], you know, I, I really had just, I had not encountered, you know, um, folks who were, uh, of the Arabized world who were of Black heritage in the United States interested in talking about that, interested in naming that, you know, and even for, for me and my brothers, I think we're all in different places about what our cultural inheritance and heritage means, and how we relate to it and position ourselves to it. And so it meant, it truly meant more than I can say, you know, to, to see someone who is writing out of the same intersection or an adjacent intersection, you know?

Um, despite the differences in our experience, there's, there's also a sameness. You know, and something immediately lifted in me where I felt, uh, kind of less tentative, a little less scared, to be honest, to pursue these questions, which were painful and complicated. And so, I think, you know, it wouldn't be hyperbolic to say that Safia is inside the work and like a generative on a generative level, or a constitutive level, because there was a permission granting by being together that I experienced.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: And in fact, I believe in both your first book, and your second book, you have poems that directly reference her. One of them I think [00:10:00] is directly addressed to her and the other includes her.

[10:04]

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yes, and I somehow I don't know how I would have forgotten that [laughs] but I, but I did thank you for the reminder there is one that is.

is after and to in the first book, um, and, uh, she makes an appearance and you make an appearance in “Self Determination with the Question of Race,” which is in the second one. Yes.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: And in talking about this interview, you had also mentioned that you had just interviewed each other, uh, I believe for an upcoming issue of Mizna.

Might you say just a little bit what the experience of interviewing one another was like?

SAFIA ELHILLO: It uh, it wasn't quite interviewing one another. I was specifically interviewing Charif for the issue of Mizna where I, uh, it actually, the issue just came out. I just got mine yesterday in the same batch of mail that I got Charif's book in.

Yay! Um, so really good mail day. But it's a Black SWANA takeover issue of Mizna. So, that means that not only is all of the writing in the issue by people of the Black SWANA world, but also like at every level of production, the, you know, layout designer, the copy editor, the visual arts curator, everybody on the team is a Black SWANA person.

And one of the funnest parts of getting to be the guest editors that I got to choose someone that I wanted to interview to kind of have as one of the anchors of the issue and obviously, first second and third people that came to mind were Charif Shanahan, Charif Shanahan, Charif Shanahan. And it was, um, it was before the book had come out it was, I think it was June of last year that we sat down to have the conversation, so the book was done in that like you turned everything in I think right but it hadn't been published yet?

So it was like, I thought a really nice moment to get to check in like, in the aftermath of you like kind of doing your part of the job writing the book and then kind of turning it over to the people who were gonna like midwife it into the world… to me at least felt just like a really sweet moment of checking in about this like enormous book that you've been writing for the past few years where literally

like, you broke your neck like during the trip to Morocco that I think kind of sparked a lot of the meditation that's in the book.

So it's, uh, it's a huge book and it like, I wanted to check in about it, you know, and so the, the Mizna interview was almost just an excuse to be like, *Hey, how's it going*, which I was really glad for.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, and what I love hearing that and what I would say too about my experience of doing that interview with Safia is that there's like a particular joy and pleasure in being interviewed by someone who sees and understands the, the personal experience that you have been navigating and, and really the intersections that you inhabit, you know, where you reside, you know, um, culturally, racially, uh, in a way that's known personally, in a way that's shared, right, there, there was some kind of, uh, recognition that I felt even just in the quality of the questions, you know, that there was an immediacy, there was a level of comprehension and depth that, uh, was always already there before we even, you know, really began.

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah, and one of the things we wanted to make sure to do in that issue of Mizna, and which I also like specifically wanted to do in that interview, is um, it's not, an explanatory issue, you know, it's not like *for those of you that don't know that there are black people in Southwest Asia and North Africa. Here's the deal. Here's like who we are, what we are.*

It's um, it's not like an ambassadorial project, you know what I mean? We're talking to each other. And so it was really nice to get to sit with Charif and talk about the work with all of that context already being covered so that like there weren't any like *So what's the deal?*

What are you? How would you describe yourself? How do you identify? like questions like that? And so we could just face each other and talk to each other instead of facing outwards and being like, *for those of you wondering what's going on, he's Moroccan. I'm Sudanese,* you know what I mean? Like that's, and there's such an intimacy to getting to do that, talking to the other person, like they already know exactly what you mean. I, I just, I feel like we got to cover so much more

interesting grounds that way, instead of having to, like, get into any kind of explanation.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Well, I truly cannot wait to read the issue. It sounds phenomenal and like an important contribution.

[14:42]

And you're actually making me think, Safia. So for our listening audience, I had the pleasure of hearing Safia give the Moore Lecture at Northwestern just a few days ago. And really such a phenomenal lecture and, and, uh, you know, work of criticism, uh, in addition to your work as, as a poet, I, I was really excited to hear kind of more of your critical voice.

And I was curious, just what you said made me think about something that you said, I think it may have been during the Q& A. You sort of depicted the experience as a younger writer or when your, your work was first kind of emerging and being seen as experiencing a kind of anthropological gaze from White readers who were, you said, kind of reading the work for not so much the work itself, but for the kind of exotic details that it might give them from a sort of more anthropological lens.

And I wonder if you'd be willing to say more about that. And then for both you and Charif, you know, if you could say a little bit about what you think of when you think of your readers or who you're writing to?

SAFIA ELHILLO: I did have the experience as a younger writer of, um, having my work read as anthropology, but not even, like, there were some poems where I was maybe specifically describing, you know, a scene that took place in Sudan in childhood in something. But a lot of the times I would like bring in a poem to workshop and it would just be a poem about like crying on the subway or something. And someone would be like, *wow, this is such an interesting look into your culture.* And I'm like, *what culture, what are you talking about?*

Um, and so it, it felt like no matter what my concerns actually were, what my interests actually were, the only way my poems were being read in that moment were as like, I don't know, like dispatch from your friendly neighborhood Sudanese person. And I think because of the particular, I don't know, biases and prejudices and everything that those readers were bringing to the work, in trying to make those poems, um, in a language that, that reader would feel they had easy access to, that like, um, that they had some sort of fluency and that they could bring their own kind of preexisting beliefs and ideas and prejudices into, I was opening myself up to a kind of interpretation of the poems that felt out of my hands and really painful.

And so I kind of made the decision to make my poems a little bit illegible to whoever I wasn't talking to. And, you know, it's not exactly what I'm doing in my work these days, but in that moment, there would just be, you know, like large chunks of untranslated Arabic and, um, references to cultural figures that like, you know, people like in my family would know who I was talking about, but the readers in that particular workshop would not know what I meant when I said [name?] 18 min up the teleconference, for example, and I wasn't going to gloss that reference or add a footnote or anything. If the reader was curious enough, very easy to Google who that person is. But I, because at first I was like, oh, because these readers are reading my work anthropologically, I can't write about Sudan anymore because it's going to be read this way.

But that, you know, that's not fair. Why shouldn't I get to write about Sudan if that's what I want to be doing? And so I kind of just had to make the decision to kick that reader out and lock the door a little bit and then not think about them anymore. So now when I'm writing, it's not so much like, oh, what will a White reader make of what I'm doing here? Or like, let me intentionally make this opaque to a White reader.

That's, I'm not thinking about any reader that's not my exact reader anyway. And I'm not like, you know, contorting myself into having my work have a particular effect on a dominant culture reader who is not who I'm thinking about in the first place.

So I'm writing to who I'm writing to, it kind of varies from poem to poem. And then, but you know, anyone is welcome to read my poems, I don't have a problem with that, but the intended effect, at least I hope that's what's happening in the poems, is that someone who maybe doesn't have all the same context as I do will just have the experience on like eavesdropping on a conversation where they maybe won't know exactly what's going on or what all the references mean, but there's still something there that's like, you know, worth listening in on.

And so that's a, you know, I think there are many versions of any poem. I think it depends on who the reader is and they're like whatever version of the poem is ultimately a collaboration between the writer and the reader. And so I think there is a version of the poem for a reader who is not, I don't know, Black, Muslim, Sudanese, American, Sagittarius, Femme [laughs].

But, you know, I can't quite tell you what that version of the poem looks like because it's kind of none of my business, but I, my hope is that there's still something there, you know, even if that poem doesn't function as a mirror as. It's not intended to function as a window either, but it's like hopefully still doing something interesting.

[20:11]

CHARIF SHANAHAN: I love everything that you just said, Safia. Um, I think, I think for me when I think about readership, there, there isn't an individual or kind of individual that I'm writing to or for necessarily, but what I do consider is the kind of objections to my lived experience that I encounter as an individual, the questions that my body poses to individuals who are, you know, set on racializing me in a particular way, assuming that they understand my story before having spoken to me about it, right?

Um, the way in which there's a kind of instability of my racialized experience in that, you know, I'll, I'll walk into this room and I will be firmly Black with other Black people and I'll walk into that room and folks will miss it, you know, or I'll, I'll find myself in a room with, White, racist individuals in whatever the context is,

and they are missing that there's a person of color among them, much less a Black person, and they let some crazy shit fall out of their mouth.

You know, that sort of thing is just constitutive of my racial experience. There's... there's a way that it would shift, uh, depending on room and, and context. And so it's not that I'm trying to replicate that at all in the poems or that it's important to me to capture that poetically. But what it does end up generating for me is an attention to the kinds of assumptions that I am met with and therefore I expect my poems to be met with, right?

About the subject position of the person speaking to them, of the speaker, right? Um, the cultural context. And I have, in some poems, found my, myself kind of in anticipating critique, in a way, um, that is not of poetry, exactly, that is of... the sort of decisions or choices that an individual will make about their identities and who they are and how they navigate the world and to accommodate or anticipate those, those objections.

So, for example, you know, one of the assumptions that I've encountered in my life or one of the critiques that is based in the assumption of people around me is that there is a lack of awareness on my part between, you know, a U.S. American Black identity and the Black identity of other parts of the diaspora and, uh, a lack of sensitivity to the distinct, uh, histories, though related.

And that couldn't be further from the truth. You know, like, I am highly aware of the distinctions and the complexities of, um, descendants in the United States of folks who are not from the Americas, who are not descendants of, of, uh, enslaved Africans in the Americas. And so I'm thinking of one poem in the book, um, and probably in more than one, where I found myself stitching into the poem somehow, an indication that the speaker, and thereby Charif, the maker of this poem, is conscious of this. Right, that the complexities I'm drawing out are the questions that I'm raising because I think I'm, I'm finally more interested in questions than I am in answers, you know, the questions that I'm raising, do not come out of a lack of awareness or a lack of sensitivity to the operative elements of the larger discussion or the constitutive components of what marks a particular identity versus another.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Would you be willing to turn to that, poem?

CHARIF SHANAHAN Yeah, let me… Let me give a concrete example. It would be in more than many, but let, let me... So, “Worthiness,” the final poem in the collection, right, like a moment of juxtaposition, the following lines. So, in an email to a student I explained, to racialize is the act of assigning a racial category to a person's body, e.g. an Arab from the Maghreb, his mother in the United States, is racialized as Black. Right? Like, if we stop there, we see the, the kind of arbitrariness of the, the act of racialization, right? That there's also a distinction between the way that the mother in the poem would identify herself, or does identify herself, and the way that she might be racially identified.

One interpretive misstep, in my view, would be to conclude based on these two lines that There is a flattening of, uh, the complexities of Black experience, diasporic, uh, regardless of where we are, right? Or certainly a flattening of, uh, diasporic Black experience once individuals have arrived here. And yet the very next line of the poem, deliberately, is “scientists say there is no single physical attribute that establishes a so called race,” right?

[25:08]

So it's sort of, it takes a step back to account for what it is that we're talking about at all. The interpretive misstep critique of that line might be the conclusion that the speaker believes that race is not real at all. And so the very next line of the poem is, “scientists say trauma lives inside the body and is passed on generationally, which couldn't get more real.”

Um, and so that just as like a four line snippet is what I mean, you know, like curatorially, like, “Worthiness” is a very long poem that consists of one line stanzas. And so in the making of this poem, as an example, one of the questions was really curatorial in terms of establishing an order and juxtaposition and how do we get from one thread back to another thread and how do we move between the constitutive threads of the poem.

And so curatorially the decision to have those four lines in succession is a kind of response to the imagined critique that I'm trying to describe that is imagined as a consequence of my lived experience and moving through the world and the kinds of critiques or criticisms I find myself up against.

Does that make it more clear?

SAFIA ELHILLO: Absolutely. Um, you said, “Worthiness” is the last poem in the book, right? What is the last line? I remember reading it and it, um -

CHARIF SHANAHAN: The last two lines are, “When I turn away from the day, I enter an unconscious state. I seek it.” Line break. “Though years ago I wrote, I want to enter my life like a room.”

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yes, I yelled when I read that because the first book is *Into Each Room we Enter Without Knowing.* And it just pairs them in a way that really just lit up a part of my brain that was very excited by that.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: I love that. Yeah. That was part of the reason why I chose to end this, the book with, with this poem, the way that, you know, that ending, that like quote of earlier work, you know, would testify to the continuity of the questions and the issues, right? Like the ongoingness of them and also kind of make a sort of palimpsest of my own inquiry.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: So that actually raises a question that I have for both of you, because Safia, in, your first collection, *The January Children*, you have a poem, uh, titled “Self Portrait with Yellow Dress,” uh, whose first line is, “And sometimes we do not die,” which I saw as, you know, directly connected to your second collection, *Girls Who Never Die*, and this kind of act of writing into the poems of your first collection as, as I hear you connecting, uh, Charif doing in, in that final poem of his second collection... I'm, I'm wondering for both of you if that's a sort of intentional process, if you looked at the work in your first collection and thought about the ways that you were perhaps writing into some of those same concerns, but also in ways that, that deepened them or, or took them in, in other directions?

I know Safia, you also in between your two collections wrote a novel in verse. So I, I imagine, you know, there might be other ways that you see writing into the concerns of the first book. And not to say, you know, your new collections are covering the same ground as the first ones. I think they're, they're very distinct in, in both of your cases.

But I'm curious about that process, uh, I've heard this idea that poets have a kind of lifelong body of concerns that they're writing into, uh, in many different ways. I'm wondering, does that ring true for you or, or do you see it otherwise?

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah, um, I actually had not made the connection between that line in "Self Portrait with the Yellow Dress" and the title of *Girls That Never Die* until now. So thank you so much for catching that. Turns out I've only cared about one thing this whole time [laughs]. Um, but I think so many of my poems and of my body of work and my books and my projects or whatever are a symptom of a larger existing obsession that I have in my life, you know, these obsessions don't emerge in service of the poetry. It's just that this is already what's on my mind. And then eventually I sit down and write a poem and all the things I care about and I'm thinking about emerge.

You know, there are a lot of phrases or like combinations of words that I think pop up over and over and over again in my work in general, sometimes to my own detriment. I will be self aware about that, but it's um, it's a device I'm interested in because I, I just, I really care about repetition. I'm really interested in repetition. I'm, um, really, really interested in what happens when you like keep striking that same note because it's not it… there's like, there's no such thing as repetition, actually.

[29:52]

You know, what repetition is, is really just a study of transformation of like, how can I make these exact noises again, but every, every new utterance transforms the phrase or the word or the sentiment in some way. I love just like ringing the one bell over and over and over and examining the ways in which it will never be the same bell again. You know what I mean?

So, I don't think there are as many phrases between the *January Children* and *Girls that Never Die* that do that, but within the books themselves, I think they're just like phrases, images, um, combinations of words that I'm using over and over and over because I want to see how the context will change them or how, um, saying this earlier on in the book when we're like young and fresh-faced versus saying it later on in the book where, you know, we've all aged in sitting through my sadass poems, um, um, how how the phrase or the word is different then, you know, and it's just it's one of my favorite devices.

It's like my my favorite toy every time I'm sitting down to make some work.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, I think that that quote the final Line, uh, the final part of the final line of this book, I think, is the only language that appeared in the first book explicitly. Maybe there are phrases, you know, like, uh, identity markers and language of identity that would recur but used differently and in a different context.

So I, I don't think about that so much as I do think about recurring images and language within the context of an individual collection and how that can be like a cohering element. Um, you know, there was, what was the, the bird in the first book, there was a bird [laughs] that I'm forgetting, um, Blackstart. There was a Blackstart, uh, which felt, you know, operative on a number of levels and that, that bird appeared in a few, a few of the poems at various points of this, you know, of the collection. And there were also… one of the things I like to think about, too, is, you know, pairing individual poems through a gesture of title.

So, you know, in the first book, as an example, there was “Gnawa Boy, Marrakesh, 1968,” and then also, um, “Haratin Girl, Marrakesh, 1968,” and they were clearly a pair, and “Gnawa” ended with an em dash, Haratin Girl started with an em dash so that there was like a formal indication of continuity and they were also extensions of the same scene, but in very different parts of the book, you know. In *Trace Evidence* I think there are two poems, talking with.. one is with my boss about diversity and inclusion and one is with God… gestures like that, uh, I'm drawn to.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: This is very interesting to me because, um, also in the new collection, you have a direct kind of self referential, I guess, kind of searching that you do. Your long poem that forms the center of the collection “On the Overnight from Agadir,” and then in, I believe, not the, not the next poem, but soon after you have a poem titled “Fig Tree,” in which you are directly writing about the act of writing that other poem.

I'll just quote just briefly, as I type you see how these words connect to “On the Overnight from Agadir”, a poem in the same book, and for a long second envision extending that poem into a book length poem. So you're, you're actually writing about the process of writing, you know, in the same book about another poem, and I wonder about how you think about the sort of temporality of that in a way that that kind of messes with the readers’ perception of this as a kind of, uh, even though it is a very, you know, finished, polished, uh, collection, there's also a sense of you being in the moment, you know, the reader being in the moment with you as you are writing, which is impossible, of course, but somehow you do it.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Thanks. Um, part of what I want to do with the first section of the book and part of my interest in racial categories, the constructedness of racial categories, how we are made to acknowledge the dual reality and fiction of them in order to live our lives is the way that it affects language and our ability to communicate and reach one another.

And so in a poem like “Mulatto Quadroon, Somewhere Between,” you know, those, those words are in quotation marks to kind of spotlight that language is the object of inquiry here as much as we're also talking about the speaker's personal experience. And you know, that, that poem kind of meditates or circles around the impossibility of expressing your personal experience when you are not accounted for within a particular social world.

[35:08]

And so how, how can you be known or how can your experience be known and how can you language your experience if there is no language for you? And if you are illegible, you know, um, in a way I don't, it might seem like an exaggeration,

right, or, or a leap, you know, um, to, to draw this conclusion. But in a way, you don't really exist within a particular social context if you are not recognized and named, right?

And so part of what I'm interested in doing in this book and one of the questions of my life as a poet is how these lived circumstances, the, the, the question of communication based on the identity questions, is how it affects my capacities, my ability as a poet, what that means about my ability to communicate through language on the page.

And so there are, Ars Poetica, you know, that, that begins to emerge in this third section, you know, there's, um, a poem called “My Work” as an example, uh, which is another example of pairing, because in the first section, there's “My People,” right? Where, you know, the speaker is sitting down at a ramblin table looking into their backyard, right, and not putting a word down on the page, just as an example, and so, you know, there's another poem, “Love,” a lover tells the speaker not to take himself so seriously, one morning after sex, handing back a draft of this very poem, right, and so the previous poem is, the previous draft is gone, is unknowable to us, and what we know is the revision based on the lover's, um, the lover's feedback, and so I think “Fig Tree” is, is kind of a pronounced example of that, it's sort of a, a real time demonstration or performance of how the relationship between language and identity are, how that relationship is not only fraught, but how interdependent, right? Um, in a way that might modify one's own self concept or ability to communicate.

And so I think there's a line in that poem that says, “to ask how many languages you speak is to ask how many selves exist inside you,” you know, and it's my, it's my belief, you know, and this is the sort of thing that may, maybe somebody would roll their eyes, but it's, it's my belief that the three selves that are communicating right now, that are talking to one another within the context of this interview, are not the selves that began this interview.

Like, we have, we have shifted one another, we have changed things inside of one another. There is information that I've received listening and seeing the two of you that has shifted something that would be hard to account for. And so within the

context of a 30 minute conversation, like, your, your, your language evolves, right? Like, you, you evolve.

And so I think I'm really trying to spell out I might be moving away from answering your question now, Isaac, but what I'm really trying to do with that poem is spell out the way that identity pressurizing language plays out specifically within the context of poem-making, and how that reflects back on identity or identities.

SAFIA ELHILLO: There's also a pairing, um, you have that poem called “My Work,” and there is a really gutting scene in the long poem “Agadir,” where right as the bus crashes, the speaker says, my work, like I, I'm paraphrasing, but I, I haven't finished my work. And then later on in the book, we encounter the poem, “My Work.”

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, that's like the, I love that, um, that aspect that you just identified. That's like the, it's like pouring fiber into the book or something. You know, it's like, it's like making it come together and hold, you know, even as the structure of the book, like the physical presentation of the book breaks it up into its constitutive elements, there's still some kind of glue, some through lines.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: This is really interesting and it's making me kind of think about the role of the long poem in the collection.

And, and just another, I mean I think we're pointing some of the ways that it, it kind of spreads out into the other two sections of the book, or that there is this kind of thread of, of conversation between the different sections. Another connection that I saw was in the poem, “Fig Tree,” that there's a kind of image of the tree and its roots.

[39:34]

And then, of course, the first line of “On the Overnight from Agadir,” you have, “Don't go to discover your roots, Ladybug says. If you want to look for roots, go and look at a tree.” And then “Fig Tree” being about this process of migration and

diaspora and identity, but very much the kind of play or interplay of, of these different poems, contributing to a larger conversation that can only be understood if you read the collection as a whole, and read what, what these poems are saying to each other.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, absolutely. And I would, I would also add the example that Safia mentioned about my work with the redwood, right, and it's there, there too, you know.

I think, I think decisions, curatorial and aesthetic decisions like the ones that we're talking about, are what mark for me the process of bookmaking, you know, there is the generating the distinct drafts and writing the drafts and, you know, compiling them together to form something that looks like a book, and then really, interrogating what it is that you have inside these poems and what the relationship is and what new poems might assert themselves as a consequence of a particular placement, or just thinking about poems that are maybe three years apart in their making side by side.

You know, and then drawing those elements out, you know, and, and deliberately emphasizing those, I, I find that to be like a really gratifying and, and fun part of putting a book together.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Absolutely. And that's really remarkable. I didn't think about the connection with the Redwood and also “My Work” as in poems on a page and paper being made from a tree. That's, yeah, that's incredible and part of what you were saying in terms of us not being the same people that we were 30 minutes ago. I love that sort of iterative process of continuing to unpack these connections. And, I mean, obviously, there are even connections that may not be intentional, you know, on the part of the author.

Like, Safia, what you were saying about, um, you know, not remembering the line from “Self Portrait with Yellow Dress” in your first collection.

And I guess I'm wondering about, like, what do you think about this question of intentionality as writers? And, uh, I know that we're getting into, you know, pretty,

pretty big, heavy territory here, but, you know, how do you think of yourselves in relationship to your writing?

Actually, Safia, after your, uh, talk the other night, I went to my, uh, library carol, to, to go do some work and was rereading *The January Children* after that and, and seeing all these amazing connections between the talk and, and your work, and then I was flipping through some old notebooks of mine and I was coming across these poems that I have absolutely zero memory of writing.

And I was like, who was this person?

SAFIA ELHILLO: You know, I, um, I often feel like I ascribe intention to the work after the fact where I know that I know what I'm doing, but when I'm in, in the act of doing oftentimes truly just vibes, just feeling around in the dark, you know? So it's really not necessarily my critical brain that is active in the poems that is working on the poems in that way where I'm usually trying to figure… the reason I'm able to then after the fact kind of articulate something in like a critical or theoretical space is because I've already done that work of like conducting the experiment in the space of the poem, figuring it out.

And then I can give you my dispatch after, but you know, even the, the lecture the other day, I don't know that before writing *The January Children*, I would have been able to get up and be like, you know, I am interested in Arabizing English and in hybridizing my linguistic practice. But you know, it's what I was already doing, but I don't know that I knew I was doing it.

I was just talking how I talk and doing my very best to write poems that reflect how I talk. That's the only order I know how to work in. I actually don't think I would be able to pull off a poem if I kind of showed up with any kind of advanced decision in place about like, I would like to write a poem that demonstrates the ways in which I, as a poet and as a thinker am interested in arabism English.

You know, that's not a generative prompt for me. It's almost like I need to, um, please forgive this like terrible science metaphor. I, you know, have never done science in my life, but, you know, I, I first need to show up, conduct the

experiment, figure it out, and then afterwards I can like, write you a report with my findings.

But, it can't happen the other way around ever. Like, everything I know about my poems and my projects, I have learned through making my poems and, you know, investigating my projects. It's not It wasn't like a pre-existing container for me to like pour ideas and work into.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: I love that, Safia. Um, that was a great scientific analogy [laughs].

[44:53]

Um, you know, I, I think I would echo what Safia has said about it being a really intuitive process. You know, I, I joke when I'm asked about how poems start for me that I very rarely sit down to write a poem. And it's, it's actually, it's not untrue. You know, let me put it that way. Like, I have a relationship with language, you know, that is marked by necessity, you know, interfacing with others, and then also assistance in comprehending experience -my own, those of the people around me, you know, pursuing questions and, you know, the way that many of the poems begin for me is is not as poems in a Word document, you know, or in my Notes app, you know, a thought that I have, a question I have, a memory that is reasserting itself, you know, in my mind that, uh, I think is trying to tell me something, and so my task is not to write a poem, it's to try to figure out what it is that it's trying to tell me, and I put language to that, you know, and I just, I just start to language what comes, and because trained as a poet, you know, the, the tools of poetic craft inevitably come into that language engagement where I'm pursuing this thing that I can't name, which is kind of the point of putting language around it.

Um, and eventually it starts to look like a poem and eventually becomes a poem. And so the whole process up until that point is very intuitive, focused on a different outcome, you know, it's about living as best I can and with as much consciousness as I can and using the available tools to me to live well.

And, you know, that the poems are a byproduct of that, a necessary byproduct of that, feels like a gift to me, you know, but certainly not the intention and so intention authorial intention, I think, really comes in once I'm at the place where what started out as a prose paragraph in my notes app for about 17 months is suddenly now in tercets and, you know, there's something like a title at the top and that's where intention starts to come in and where I think about what it is that I have what it is that has emerged from me over time and then I begin to shape it consciously as poem.

I also think that our intention actually doesn't, I mean, and this is maybe implicit in your question, but our intention as poets has nearly nothing to do with anything at all to do with how the poems are received or the kind of meaning they make or, you know, what Safia was saying earlier about, uh, the poem being a collaboration between, you know, the author and the reader.

I don't know if that's the language you used or if you said the words on the page and the reader's imagination, which is what you were I would say too.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: I, I want to, uh, come back to what you were saying about tercets and form. But first I wanted to ask Safia, so I, I had a question about this in relationship to your new book, uh, *Girls Who Never Die.* It, it struck me that in particular, in the opening, the poems themselves almost felt like couplets to each other. And I wonder if that was an intentional move or at what point that kind of conversation between the poems developed? I can give you some examples of what I mean.

So the first poem, “Final Weeks, 1990,” is followed by, uh, the poem “Orpheus.” And it seems like there's a sort of, uh, mirroring between the relationship between your mother and father. And the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice, except there's actually an inversion almost in that the ending to, to “Orpheus” is “all I know about Eurydice is that she died. My every other fact about her is about him.”

And in, in kind of contrast to that, the poem before you, basically, the, the details that emerge about your father are narrated through your relationship to your

mother. Uh, like for example, “my mother called him Jack, and this is my only proof they were in love.” And then I saw that continuing, you know, in, in the next several poems, at least, “Profanity,” and, and then “How to Say,” and then “Yasmin,” and “Taxonomy.” I mean, all of these poems are, I would say, in conversation with each other, but it felt like there was a series of poem. A poem B poem A poem B that almost felt like couplets to each other. And I wonder, I wonder what you think about that.

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah, I love the phrasing of calling them couplets to each other. The language I'd been using in my head secretly up until this point is that I love when poems have sequels. So, you know, but I have a poem I think I've like, said the thing that I was feeling around trying to say. But then I love after that poem is done pulling up with a revision or an addendum or whatever. a coda or something, because that's also just how my obsessions work. I've, you know, think I've exercised something and then next time I sit down to write a poem, there's a little aftershock.

[50:14]

Turns out I'm still obsessed with the same thing. And so a lot of those poems kind of are evidence of that process where there usually will be one that's much older than the other but they're paired in that way because maybe something in my thinking has changed or I've learned something or I want to go back and write back into something that I said the first time around that I think of a little differently now or I found new phrasing for that I also want to, you know, I just want to show my work, you know what I mean?

And then “Orpheus” in particular, and having it be, having “Final Weeks, 1990” and “Orpheus” be the first two poems in the book. “Final Weeks, 1990” feels to me like the poem that bridges *The January Children* and *Girls That Never Die*, where it's kind of, uh, revisiting a lot of the concerns of that first book.

Family history, the long 20th century diaspora, my parents, like kind of that mythologizing work of nostalgia. And then “Orpheus,” the myth of Orpheus itself, not necessarily the way it's used in that poem, uh, feels a little bit like an Ars

Poetica for me where, um, you know, the, the big, like, I don't know, plot twist in the myth is that he looks back and loses everything.

And so I, uh, I'm trying to take the lesson from that and, uh, so much of my work up until that point had been a work of looking back, you know, I think I've just had enough of looking back and wanted to instead hang out in the present or even in the future, you know, where I. I didn't want to just be this like forever toxic nostalgic and every time I sat down to write a poem, it was about like a lost golden age of my beloved homeland, you know? I wrote that book and now I have exorcised some of that stuff and some of that need to look back.

And now I, you know, as a poet, as a thinker, as like a human being, I needed to reorient myself away from the work of looking backward and towards something else for once. And so that's kind of what got me thinking about the myth of Orpheus in the first place. But the way it ends up actually being used in the poem is its own thing.

But that's kind of, that's what the prompt was originally. I was like, *Orpheus, don't look back. Safia, don't look back.*

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: And then I, I, I think just the looking forward of creating your own mythology and, and *Girls who Never Die* as being sort of the antithesis of Eurydice and, and sort of, in, in that, uh, "Orpheus" poem, there is a sort of critique of the patriarchal Western kind of sense of mythology as something inherited from the Greeks and the Romans and all the awfulness that that comes with that sort of whole framework of, you know, seeing human consciousness and, uh, the human condition through this one particular set of myths and why, why can't there be others?

SAFIA ELHILLO: So much of the fun for me in writing poems that contain elements of autobiography is to get to do like the fun work of myth-making. I grew up reading a lot of Greek mythology. The takeaway from that wasn't so much like, *oh, only people of this particular background are allowed to have mythology.* It's just like, *how fun would it be to get to turn that eye to the people and places and*

experiences of my own life. Um, and to get to just like, turn that mythologizing eye onto the like mundane facts of my own life.

What could that be like. For me it was like mythology is a playground as an invitation to play to make something up to envision to dream instead of just like feeling like my work as a poet was to like report the sad facts of history and my like resulting traumas, you know, like, have done that will probably keep doing that. But that's like, I'm allowed to do other things, I think. I'm allowed to also play in my poems and have fun and make things up and dream and like, write a poem where a bunch of birds save a girl from being stomped to death. Sometimes my work as a poet is as a historian, but I think in doing that work for so long, I forgot that I'm also like, allowed to make things up.

[54:44]

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: And I'm curious to return. Back to something that you'd said, Charif, in terms of the transformation of the kind of seed of a poem or, you know, the idea that then becomes the you know, the poem in tercets or, or whatever form. Um, I'm wondering if both of you could speak to this question of form, because I think something that's really interesting about both of your bodies of work is that you seem to move between sort of couplets or tercets or, or more, I guess, classical forms in, in your poems, and poems that are more experimental in their shape on the page or that kind of occupy longer lines. Just any, anything that you'd want to say about this kind of interplay between received or inherited forms and a free verse or, you know, experimental elements of your work.

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah, I think the poems in *Girls Who Never Die* that are in inherited forms are, um, kind of the foundation of the collection for me because the way I got back into writing poems after I was finished writing *The January Children* was by setting myself these, like, low stakes exercises in form.

Because, you know, I had written and published a first book that I'd like been working on in some capacity kind of my whole life. I don't know that you're ever meant to finish that kind of project. And then I finished it and there was a moment

afterwards where I was like, *okay, what now, you know, uh, will I ever write a poem again?*

And because *The January Children* also is a project book and had that kind of set of conceits and recurring characters and images and stuff, I had, um, I was never really approaching a blank page when I was working on that book. I already had a sense of what I wanted to investigate or interrogate or like who would be populating my poems, that kind of thing.

And so to be finished with that project and then like kind of encounter a truly blank page for the first time was terrifying, devastating. It felt too high stakes to sit down and be like, okay, let me sit down and prove to myself that I still know how to write a poem. You know, who wants to write a poem under those conditions?

For so long it felt like I was right, like sitting down to write, to prove to myself that I didn't just have the one book in me or that I still had something to say, or that I was like, still like worthy of writing poetry, and that just was not generative, not fun, did not have the effect of making me want to ever write poetry again.

So I, um, kind of really had to go back to basics and be like, okay, like, *no one is saying like sit down and write a poem that's good or that proves that you're still a writer or whatever like, just like, sit down and write a ghazal.* Maybe it'll be bad, but that's because you've never written a ghazal before not because you're like worthless as a poet or whatever.

I really, really had to do a lot of those exercises to start to get my sea legs back and be able to just, like, reaccess my poet-brain in that way, where at first it wasn't like, *write a poem, prove you can do it.* It was just like, *okay, one, you know, syllable at a time, one line at a time, one, like, repeating end word at a time.*

I was so immersed in the activity that I forgot to be stressed out about what it all meant. And it was a really helpful way for me to re enter the space of making poems. And so obviously 95 percent of those poems are not in the book because they're not good, but they were so helpful, and so many of the poems in the book are like the tip of the iceberg and what you can't see is the like 17 bad ghazals I

wrote to get to the one that's in the book and I didn't really have a particular relationship to inherited forms before this it's you know, I would read poems in inherited form and was interested in them as a reader and as an observer, but it didn't seem like something I thought I would know how to do or be interested in trying to do.

And it turns out I love inherited forms. I love, uh, the freedom that constraint gives you, where if it's just like you're sit down and faced with a blank page and responsible for making a series of decisions out of like an infinite list of possible decisions… how overwhelming, you know? Uh, so it's nice to kind of have some of the decisions taken off my plate so I can just be like, okay, well, I know how long it's going to be and I know that this word has to keep repeating. So of the like 35 remaining words in the poem, what would I like those words to be?

It just, it gave me kind of scaffolding that felt really helpful.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, I, I think about form, uh, I think about form as an extension of the subject matter, you know, is something that I don't begin with, even if the poem intent, you know, ends up being in an inherited form, you know, like I begin with the heart of it, the lifeblood of it, you know, the questions of it.

[59:58]

And in that process that I described earlier of just continuing to put language and eventually, you know, the tools of poetic craft kind of come into my engagement with that language, a form may or may, an inherited form may or may not present itself as useful.

At that point, the, the form becomes the subject matter. It becomes part of the subject, you know. And so it is a container, yes, but also constitutive of the thing. Like it, it's not separable. We can't say that the poem is in sonnet form, right? Like that it's a sonnet is an aspect of, of poem. And so I think the question then for me becomes, you know, like what I'm doing with that.

Like I'm not interested in jumping through aesthetic hoops. Um, I'm certainly not interested in upholding a fidelity or commitment to forms that emerged from Western Europe for the sake of doing that. You know, I, um, don't move away from them. I think it's important that we all, regardless of who we are, where we're from or what we're interested in, that we understand as much as we can globally of poetics, you know, over a long time and space.

But, you know, writing, writing the perfect sonnet, you know, is, is not of interest to me. You know, um, if language that I'm, I'm working with, uh, takes, takes form as a sonnet, the question for me then becomes how the sonnet is useful and how it might be manipulated or changed, you know, or what it is that I can do with or, um, modify about that form.

So I'm thinking of like a couple poems in the third section. One of them is the "My Work" poem that we, we mentioned earlier and then also "Wound," which is just to the left, so it's left and right facing, and they're both kind of broken sonnets, and the reason for that is of the individual poems' content, and, you know, and being so in, in "Wound" it's, it's, you know, all about positionality and being a thing that's at stake inside the poem and then, uh, the form kind of performs that dilemma, right, where it's, it's the ghost of a sonnet, or it's almost a sonnet, or it is a sonnet, but also not quite. Right? And how that reflects, you know, the situation of the speaker.

So, so that's typically how I, how I think about form. And, and the consequence of that is just like a wide ranging, you know, expression, formal expression of the poems.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: And I'm, I'm thinking also of "Indeterminacy," uh, which it's interesting because I read it in, in the collection. And then I saw it on Poem-A-Day because Patricia Smith curated for Black History Month uh, a series of poems, Black writers writing sonnets, and I don't, when I read it in the book, I did not think of it as a sonnet. And then when I saw it, you know, with your commentary, it made me really go back to it and, and think about it much differently. And sort of the even critique or, or play with the sonnet form itself that's going on there.

Yeah, I guess I did want to ask you a little bit more about experiment, experimentalism Charif, because I think this this new book in particular, you're doing some very different things, but in “On the Overnight from Agadir,” you have this line, “a razor of light slits my eye down the center suddenly.” Yeah, so I wonder because this long poem does have an element of surrealism, I would say.

I was, I mean, obviously the experience that it's describing is beyond surreal. But what, what I, what I take from the poem is very much this kind of surrealist collage and, and chorus of voices, as well as images that, um, that I thought was sort of, in, in this kind of surrealist domain.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, I mean, I, I think poems like “Fig Tree,” you know, maybe, maybe the, the center poem is a little bit different and I can say something about that in a second. But poems like “Fig Tree,” I think, exist inside this book as a mark of my own personal development and growth as a poet, you know. Um, not that the kinds of poems that I wrote for the first book or that might be inside this collection I think less of or aren't doing the work that they specifically can do as the kinds of poems that they are, but wanting to kind of shake things up a bit, you know, and wanting to, you know, experiment, not necessarily with experiment, experimental poetics, but with my own practice and with my own inclinations, you know, um, in the way that I approach language, the way that I try to make meaning.

And so it was, it was kind of exhilarating, to be honest, you know, to write a poem like “Fig Tree” that was self referential to, you know, to itself, but also referential to other poems in the collection that I was writing. And, um, that was so different from the kind of work that I was doing towards the first book, even as the first book had elements that, uh, you know, recurring images or motifs that, that helped it cohere, it was of a different, uh, kind of imagistic register, if you will, or formal quality.

[1:05:22]

And, and so that I think is just me growing, honestly, I think that's just me like trying to do different things or make meaning differently. I think with, uh, with the center poem, the Agadir poem, it was just such an enormous experience, and it was

such an enormous task. And I didn't, I shouldn't even use that language because I didn't think of it in that way.

Like, the, the total rupture of my life up until that point, you know, which was not a moment so much as it was a four to nine month process right, that began with the accident and that maybe ended when I landed in California for the Stegner. And that's November, 2015 to August, 2016, right? Surgery one, surgery two, surgery three.

Uh, recovering in my ex-partner's childhood home, being tended to by his mother. Then going to the Bronx because I had given up my apartment in Brooklyn before I left on the Fulbright and convalescing in my childhood bedroom for seven or eight months. I mean, the enormity of it, the magnitude of it, like the physical urgency, the emotional magnitude, the spiritual magnitude, right?

Like the questions inside that experience to think that you are about to spend a year in your ancestral homeland and to end up in your childhood bedroom, to end up home quite literally, it's like, we could think about that question and talk about the question for the rest of our lives, my life, certainly, you know.

What I set out to do was, again, use language to help me understand. Use language to help me try to make meaning of whatever the fuck it was that just happened to me, and was continuing to happen to me.

When it, when the idea of it becoming a poem, or using the language and the realizations that I found through that language in the curation of a poem, became conscious, you know, I had different thoughts about it. I thought, well, maybe there's just, the second book is one long poem all about this. And there was enough material to actually make that a reality. You know, there were enough pages for me to have done that. And, you know, that was not of interest to me in the end.

You know, I think, I think the poem didn't need a lot of the, the pages that I had generated. *I* needed them. In the process of... processing and integrating the trauma, physical, psychological, emotional, right? But the poem didn't exactly. The poem could exist, even as a long poem, you know, 18 or 20 pages, however long it

is, you know, it could be a more distilled version of the many pages and still hold everything the poem needed to hold.

It also seemed important to me that that long poem be in conversation with discrete lyric poems that constitute the first and the third section so that there was. echoing and reverberation, um, through and around the content that the, the center poem was built around. If we were to just imagine a book that was an extended version of “On the Overnight from Agadir” that didn't introduce poems like, introduce the, the reader to a family circumstance through poems like “Trace Evidence” or “Two Rooms Down the Hall” or even the opening poem, “Colonialism,” which establishes the geography, the entry point of that poem, even if the opening line of that poem were to stay the same, um, would be very different.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Absolutely. Thank you. Well, my mind is going in, like, three different directions right now, and I know we also, uh, should be cognizant of time. So, I know both of you did the Stegner Fellowship, and I believe, uh, I know Charif, we've spoken about this, and I'm not sure, Safia, but I believe both of you, um, worked with, uh, Eavan Boland. Um, or at least, you know, had, had, you know, a relationship with her through the program and I wonder if, uh, you know, given, you know, her passing, um, not that long ago, if, if there's anything you'd want to say, uh, I know, you know, Charif, you, you had, you know, said some things to me about sort of the importance of, um, of, of meeting her and working with her and I, I just wonder if either of you have, um, anything you'd want to share about that experience?

CHARIF SHANAHAN: I do. I don't know. Do you Safia?

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah. Um, I imagine you'll have more to say than I do because I only knew her for one academic quarter.

[01:10:00]

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Um, yeah, meeting her was really important to me, actually. Um, and I'm surprised to say that and that, to be honest, you know, there, there was, I knew her work before I applied for the Stegner.

The opportunity to work with Eavan Boland was not the primary reason that I applied for the Stegner, it was to have time and money to write, and the Stegner was a known quantity, you know, an opportunity that would, uh, enable that, and I admired her as a poet, and um, understood that I could learn from her as my elder, but I, I don't know that I, I really anticipated exactly how much I would learn from her or how seen I felt by her.

And what's amazing about that, what's really amazing about that, and I probably have to think about this more, is that there were ways that I felt profoundly unseen by her, but there was, which was not problematic, harmful, none of the things that one might associate with, with the not being seen, but there was a way that she recognized something essential in me that she reflected back to me that was really valuable to hear.

And, you know, at a time when I was hearing certain, the first book was already out and I was hearing certain messages. about the fashionability of writing about race. One of the assumptions that was being made was that I was writing about it because fashionable, rather than because it was existential for me, and a kind of core preoccupation of my life, intellectual and personal.

That there was a suspicion, you know, which I think is really related to optics and phenotype, and, you know, what, what could this person have to say? An Eavan said to me once, I went into her office, and she said, *It's not that you are, it's how you are. It's not that you are writing about it, it's how you are writing about it.*

And, and, to have that, that discernment, it might feel like an obvious thing to say, but there were generational gaps between us, there were cultural gaps between us, national gaps between us, right? There, we were different in, in most ways that an individual could be different, despite our shared Irish heritage.

And it really meant a lot that she could see through the smoke and hear through the noise that there was something I needed to say. And she said that to me. You know, she, she said that to me explicitly and in other ways. Like, the thing that you were trying to get at, the way that you were trying to put a light on this component of

racial experience is… something you need to do, you know, and that's invaluable. Safia, maybe you want to share with.

SAFIA ELHILLO: Yeah. Um, so because I only had Eavan, she was the first instructor I had my first quarter of my first year as a Stegner, and then she passed away that spring right after. So I knew her only very briefly. So most of my relationship to Eavan is still primarily a relationship to her poems, which I loved before I met her.

I, I didn't know what to expect when it came time to meet her because she's such a giant. She's such a titan, you know? This is maybe not what I expected to talk about, but what I really appreciated and what was really, I guess, validating for me in my time with Eavan is that it felt like she respected me enough to fight with me, because we disagreed about a lot, um, but you know, she's Eavan Boland.

I'm just some guy. So the fact that instead of being like, *excuse me, who are you? I'm Eavan Boland*. She kind of take the time to like, duke it out with me in workshop. And, um, that felt to me like a sign of respect. Like she, uh, she was willing to kind of like come to me on that playing field and like, offer me the respect of an argument.

And funnily enough, that meant a lot to me. And I was very fond of Eavan and I, uh, think very fondly of her. It was, it was so quick. It was so short, but you know, how lucky am I that for even 10 weeks, my life got to overlap with hers?

CHARIF SHANAHAN: I just, can I just add something about my experience with Eavan? Just to fill out, um, what I was saying earlier about not being seen.

[1:14:55]

I remember she called me into her office one day and said, asked me, *do you feel close to the African American poetic tradition?* And I said, uh, *yeah, parts of it. Yes.* And she said, *you know, becaus*e she made it seem like she had had a conversation with somebody, I don't, like, a peer of hers, not a Stegner or a lecturer, but, you know, someone, an elder, you know, and she said, you know,

because I, *I said to myself or to this person, you know, his father is of Irish, of the Irish Americas, and his mother is from Morocco, and that's just fine.*

And what I heard inside that, was a perception on her part that I felt shame around my heritage and that I was trying to write myself into a tradition that did not exactly hold me, and she was inquiring about my own imagined relationship to, and the language was african american And the moment was so pregnant with meaning, it was so charged, you know, because it revealed so much about her own conceptualization of race and identity and, uh, the notion of a diasporic Blackness within America as a unifying identity was something that, um, not that she wasn't aware of, of course, but that, uh, wasn't significant enough to be the element of cohesion, right?

And she, what did she say? She said something. She said, yeah, this is what she said. She said, um, I said, yeah, I do feel connected to, to parts of it. And she said, *well, because the histories are different. The histories are different.* And so she was thinking about my having been born of a people who are not descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas and how I am therefore on the outside of that history.

And it would then be questionable, or a question, that I might feel an affiliation with individuals within that tradition. But it ignored the similarities of Black history in North Africa, which many people, even North Africans themselves, seem resistant to knowing and learning. Um, but it was, it was a moment that I, I want to offer up because it's an example of how she didn't see me, but how she didn't see me was not a consequence of not wanting to see me, and it was not an expression of her telling me *you are not who you think you are*, which is something I have heard and do here, and there's a poem in the book where that exact line actually, um, appears.

It was a consequence of the way that the constructs, which because constructed, are fallible and inconsistent and geographically specific and generationally influenced, right, prevented us in that moment from touching when the only thing she wanted to do in that moment was help me. What she wanted to do actually was mentor me, and her own internalization of race, racial dynamics, traumatic racial history in the

United States, North Africa, Arab and Black, uh, mutual exclusivity, right, prevented her from, from really being able to do it.

And it was this like profound meta moment for me, because I was like, this is exactly why I need to keep talking [laughs]. This moment is exactly why I need to keep trying to do what I'm doing because the best intention is here. You know, like there's an expression of care and regard that has, that's denied, you know, and not because either of us aren't trying.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Well, I mean, there's, there's so much that, you know, that I could say in response to that. But I, I mean, I think really one of the biggest things that I'm, I'm, uh, reflecting on is just how both of your writing really intervenes in some of these dominant narratives of race that, you know, can become quite, I guess, you know, monolithic and, uh, the, the word that I'm thinking of is brittle.

That there's, there's a rigidity and a kind of brittleness to a lot of the conversations around race. In this country and beyond that don't allow for the nuance, but also don't don't actually honestly recognize the interconnectedness of these histories, and [01:20:00] I mean I'm thinking about the, the simultaneous or, you know, concurrent histories of Blackness and anti-blackness, you know, in North Africa, across the Maghreb, and, and how you know when when people talk about race as if it's a US, you know, phenomenon only, that, that that's not accounting for, you know, uh, anti-blackness or colorism or, or conceptions of racial hierarchy, you know, across the world, you know, and European colonialism and transatlantic slavery and these world destroying and world making histories as as being, you know, global systems, and I think that part of where, you know, your work is intervening is in raising from what is perceived as a sort of marginal point of view, or, you know, a exceptional point of view. Actually, you're seeing things that are, you know, incredibly relevant to the whole. And, and the, the, the submerging of that is, is a detriment to actually seeing the whole picture.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: I, I love that. Um, I think, I think we're at time, so I want to, I don't know, I want to be sensitive to that. I don't want to keep, filling the

space, but, um, what you just said reminds me of, and I think we might have talked about this when you came to my office that time, Isaac.

Um, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* by Michelle Elam. Do you know that book? There's, so, uh, she teaches at Stanford in the English department. She, I think her second book was *The Souls of Mixed Folk*. And there's a section on passing, and I think it's a brief vignette of like a page and a half, two pages that asks the question, um, why passing matters.

And she, she says that passers, or individuals who have the capacity to pass, in their supposed orbit of the racial norm, right, which would be unpassable, right, um, are thought of as fringe, peripheral, but they are actually dead center to the discourse, because they establish the limits of a racial category, "like the circumference does the circle," is the language that she uses.

And so how do you talk about the circle without talking about the circumference, which, which forms it, right, which holds it in place? Now, whether or not you agree with that, you know, is neither here nor there. It just, it comes to mind, um, with what you just said. And it changed the way that I think about passing entirely, or, passability entirely.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Um, well, I do, I do want to be cognizant of time.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: These usually contain like a poem or two, right? Don't the poets usually read a poem or two?

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Yeah. It would be, it would be lovely if you wanted to read, if you wanted to read some poems.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Yeah, maybe we could each do one or two, Saf. What do you feel like?

That's fine. Good to, okay. I have my poem. I know the poem I'm going to read. It's the one that Safia makes an appearance in.

SAFIA ELHILLO: Um, I think I'm going to read “Orpheus” because we talked about it earlier.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Do you want me to go first or do you want to go first?

SAFIA ELHILLO: Um, Let's see. I can go first, and that way I can just, uh, settle back and enjoy your poem. “Orpheus.”

[Safia reads “Orpheus”]

[1:26:05]

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Gorgeous. Ok. “Self Determination with the Question of Race”

[Charif reads “Self Determination with a Question of Race”]

SAFIA ELHILLO: Love that poem. Not just because my name's in it.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Thank you.

ISAAC GINSBERG MILLER: Beautiful poems. Thank you both so much. This has been an incredible conversation and I feel just so thankful that you made time to talk with me.

CHARIF SHANAHAN: Thank you. Thank you so much. Yeah, thanks to both of you, and thank you for your work, Isaac.

RACHEL ZUCKER: This has been Episode 117, with guest host Isaac Ginsberg Miller, and guests Charif Shanahan and Safia Elhillo. Many thanks go to University of Nebraska Press, One World, Tin House, and Isaac Ginsberg Miller. Thank you to all of our patrons. You make Commonplace possible. Thank you to everyone who sends us messages of support and encouragement.

And you, listener, thank you for listening.