

COMMONPLACE PODCAST

[EPISODE # 116](#) - The Gathered Congregation

Guest(s): Jason Schneiderman, Rachel Zucker, R.A. Villanueva, Cate Marvin, and Lynn Xu

Host(s): Jason Schneiderman & Rachel Zucker

Transcript by:

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Voice Messages from Guests

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: Hi, it's Jason Schneiderman. Um, question is why do I host all of these reading series? Um, for a while I was hosting Monday Night KGB, I've been doing that for about six years. This is my third year doing Bryant Park, and I do the reading series for my, uh, college. So, for a few years I was running three reading series, which is too much. Um, it does get to be a lot. Um, but why? What do I, why do I do this? What do I get out of it? Why do I like, um, asking people to come read?

The answer is that there's something really magical to me about a live reading. And I know that we're kind of at this moment of digital culture. Um, we're sort of at this incipient moment of digital culture where it is now very easy to hear a poet reading their work.

Um, almost all of the major journals at this point - the Poem A Day from Poets.org, Poetry Foundation, The New Yorker - they ask for sound files when you publish a poem with them, and so I think that hearing a poet read their work is actually a more common experience in the last five years than it was when I was coming up.

So in the 1990s, if you wanted to hear a poet read their work, you know, someone might have a recording of Sylvia Plath reading “Daddy.” And you’d sit around and it would be shocking that this poem that you’ve been reading in your poetry anthologies all your life is being read in this like weird like *daddy you do not do you do not do* and you’re like *what? What... how is that?*

You know, it was so different from what you would imagined and I had a very strong sense, at the time that I was learning to write, that the poem is more or less complete on the page that what we do is we choreograph the line in order to send our poems out into the world so that they’re choreographed for the internal voice of the reader who encounters them.

And so I thought of my own reading of “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath, for example, as real or as legitimate in the same way that, you know, I see millions of productions of *Twelfth Night*. I really like *Twelfth Night*. Um, and they do different things with the play. And I, and I think of both of those things as kind of the performance and the play are kind of both versions of the piece.

It’s not like a movie where, you know, *Sleepless in Seattle* is *Sleepless in Seattle*. And maybe you read the novelization of *Back to the Future* or something, but *Back to the Future* is the movie. It’s complete in this one particular kind of work. And so I think that gave me a kind of fascination with poets reading their own work.

And I loved the reading series when I was an undergraduate. I loved when they would bring a poet to campus. And a lot of times I would discover things in their voice or in their reading that I wouldn’t have discovered when I read their work. And sometimes I discovered writers who I would never have had the patience to read that I was actually a very impatient reader.

And the sort of forced act of being at the McKeldin Library on the University of Maryland for 45 minutes made me sit through something that I might not have had the patience for, and that often led to amazing discoveries.

The other thing I'll say is that another formative moment I had at a reading was when I went to the Library of Congress for, I don't remember what anniversary of the Poet Laureate program it was, the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, um, but William Meredith was reading, and William Meredith had had many strokes at this point. He had been the Poet Laureate, and he had had many, many strokes. It was, he was very much debilitated, and they helped him to the stage, and, um, he was drooling a bit, his words were difficult to understand, and everyone in the audience sat with great respect, with great reverence, and this person who I think in most of American life would have been discarded.

Uh, if you think about the way the internet reacted when Kim Novak showed up the authors and people were like, *Ah, she's Kim Novak! She was so pretty and now she looks terrible!* And Twitter was just sort of cruel. Um... That I was in a room full of people who really cared about the artist as well as the art and weren't going to discard him.

And I really thought, you know, this is kind of a community I want to be a part of. So I had all of these kinds of interactions with readings [00:05:00] and then it became something I could do when I started teaching at the MCC. And I have always loved KGB, the Monday Night Poetry KGB series that uh, David Naiman and Star Black started, and so that was something I was really excited to be invited to do, and then I, Paul, um, Romero, who started the Bryant Park series, I wanted to be in that series so much when he started it.

And so to kind of now be the person who coordinates it is, is kind of exciting. There's a sense of having made it. Um, that's another thing that maybe, I don't know if that's the same or different now, but when I was, when I was younger, giving a reading was kind of a big deal. Being invited to give a reading, you know, really excited me. And so, that I can curate that for other people now is a wonderful experience that I just really enjoy.

[6:00]

CATE MARVIN: I am actually just now picking my set list for today's reading. I generally don't plan my readings ahead of time because if I do then I will become anxious about the reading itself and I like to compartmentalize and just not really think about the reading until I'm in the space and I even sometimes change my reading list depending on what people who have read before me are reading because I like to put poems in conversation with their poems.

So the truth is I actually don't know what I'm reading today. I do have my book with me, which came out a year ago. I know that I should read from that book to promote it. I also have some new poems that I would like to share, but the thing is, is this is such a dynamic setting because we're outside and we're in a park and there's traffic... it feels like it's not even like the right space for those poems, which are set in Maine. They're about like domestic conflict. So they don't really, they feel like sort of indoor poems as opposed to outdoor poems. So I am going to have to sit here and like take the smells and sounds in for a little bit before I can really figure out what I want to put out there this evening.

R.A. VILLANUEVA: Hey, so, um, these voice notes are really great because I drive home, I teach in the Bronx and I live in Brooklyn, and so I use these afternoon voice notes to kind of capture my thoughts anyway, whether to myself or to other people on various messaging apps. So, so yeah, thank you so much for the chance to address your questions about readings and about performance.

I think what I love about doing readings is that it returns me over and over and over again to the way in which poetry lives in the body as well as on the page or in pixels on the screen. It allows for me to kind of think about how the language, how the line breaks, how the stanza structures, all those, all those formal things can act as musical notation, that they are signals and sparks for how I might, um, give new kinds of life to the elements of my, of my, of my work.

Um, I remember Sonia Sanchez once saying to a class that the ear will catch what the eye cannot. And I'm paraphrasing, um, her line. And, and she brought that up because she was urging us to continually read in kind of an incantatory way. Read

our lines aloud. Like, not just to quietly hammer together a poem, but to always, always, always incorporate into our process something about sharing the work with others.

Giving volume, giving voice, giving softness, thinking about where lines need to end because you're running out of breath. Think about which words have percussion behind them. Uh, which words have fluidity behind all that and all that. And I think an extension of that beyond the editing process is the performance process. That hearing the poem aloud and hearing the reactions of the audience, the gathered congregation, maybe is another way of putting it, uh, allows for us all to see all these, these, these deeper facets to what makes that poem that poem.

[10:01]

LYNN XU: I'm putting together the poems to read tomorrow, and I'm thinking to make a bouquet of sunflowers. I'm typing out the famous Blake "Sunflower," a couple of Sunflower Sonnets by June Jordan, and a Ginsberg "Sunflower Sutra," and I will end with a sunflower poem that I wrote, which is the postscript to my book-length poem.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hi. This is Rachel Zucker, founder and host of Commonplace. You're listening to Episode 116. You just heard from poets Jason Schneiderman, Cate Marvin, R.A. Villanueva, and Lynn Xu, responding in audio messages to my questions about poetry readings. By which I mean specifically live, in person poetry readings.

I asked these four poets about how they each prepare to give or host a reading, about how reading their poems before a live audience is part of their creative practice and process, and about the pleasures and challenges of live readings. If you've been listening to Commonplace or know my writing, you know I've been interested in the role of performance and performativity in art and poetry for a very long time.

I speak about performance and performativity at length and in depth in [Commonplace Episode 114, Live and Embodied](#), with choreographer Hope Moore

and writer Alyssa Harad. And in [episode 109](#) with poet and saxophonist Joy Harjo. And in [episode 102](#) with violinist and composer Rebecca Wolkstein. And in [episode 99](#) with poet, librettist, performer Douglas Kearney.

But performativity, audience, authenticity, and where a piece of language lives are concerns that come up in every Commonplace conversation I have. These are concerns I'm nowhere near finished exploring in my own work on the page and with Commonplace.

I love poetry readings. Or I used to. Or, I have often, before COVID, loved many poetry readings. Yeah, I think that's more accurate. What's definitely true is that the experience of reading in front of a live audience has always been an essential part of my writing and editing process, and I wanted to create a series of episodes to investigate why, how, so what?

Reading hot off the press poems is a near compulsion of mine, so preparing to give a reading almost always leads me to write or finish a new poem. And then, reading that newly finished poem at a reading in front of a live audience always makes me realize, usually with a certain amount of shame and terror, that the poem is not finished. And, I've always felt a little sheepish about admitting this, but being in the audience of a poetry reading is one of my favorite places and times to write.

For the rest of this episode, you will hear Jason, Kate, Ron, Lynn, and I talk about hosting or participating in readings, and then you'll hear some excerpts from the June 6th, 2023 reading at Bryant Park, hosted by Jason Schneiderman, that Cate, Ron, Lynn, and I participated in. You'll also hear from some of the members of the audience who were present that evening.

I'll be back soon to give you more information about this episode and the podcast. Until then, welcome to The Gathered Congregation. I hope you'll enjoy hearing and thinking about the role of poetry readings and how and where poetry lives in the body.

[14:05]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: If you're hosting the I think that the most important thing to do is to know the work of the people you're hosting. I think a lot of times, we as poets, you know, someone's paying you a lot of money. If you're, if you're going, you know, if you're getting a plane ticket and a hotel room and you get to a university and the person who introduces you is just reading your biography from the back of a book, um, okay, fine. I mean, you know, you're being compensated in other ways.

But if you're... if you're hosting a reading series and the reader is reading for very little, for a nominal fee, for the chance to sell their books, just as a favor, um, just as something that they're doing because you asked them to do, particularly if they're traveling, I think that the most important thing to do is show the audience that you value them by being familiar with their work.

So I really love to give introductions and I learned this from many people. I learned this from Phyllis Levin at the University of Maryland. I learned this from Matt Yeager at KGB. Um, the legend was that David Lehman would do these incredible introductions with no notes, that he just kind of knew everyone's entire career.

Um, and so I like, I think that by giving introductions that let the reader know that I know their work and that I'm invested in it and that I care about it, it tells the audience that it's something to care about. It tells the audience that it's not something to just kind of... show up and get through, that it's a really exciting event. And I think that that energy kind of carries through.

CATE MARVIN: When you write poems and you put them out in the world, you don't actually get to be part of the poem's experience with the reader. And it's really great to be there with your own poem in the moment and hearing it. And a lot of times I feel like I sort of have forgotten the poem or I'm just sort of getting to know the poem again.

It's almost like someone else has read it or written it. And that's really exciting, and it's also just amazing to be in the company of people who care about poetry and appreciate it. Because, um, you know, I think that most writers have close

friendships with other writers, but we don't generally spend, you know, our sort of public facing time with people who are as invested in poetry as we are ourselves.

So, that's just generally thrilling, and it also really feels like an honor to be able to have people listen to me. Still, after all these years, that's something I will like the most. never ever take for granted. Um, and in fact, I do live in fear of boring people when I'm reading. So there's that.

R.A. VILLANUEVA: I don't think there's anything I hate per se about readings, but I think what is always a challenge is the way in which a performance depends upon the ears and the eyes and the hearts of the people being performed to.

And so, there's always uncertainty about what will be received and how they are receiving it [laughs]. There's, there's such a feeling of um, inadequacy when the things that you're excited about aren't responded to with any kind of, with sort of like medium excitement, you know? Like when the crowd goes mild instead of wild, to be corny, with a rhyme. I mean that's what I'm, that's what I'm consistently nervous about, obviously, right?

That you, you're pouring your heart out and, and trying to, uh, share something about what you need to reckon with. And you just get blank stares, or they roll their eyes, or... they're... they're [laughs], they're checked out and checking their phones or something. That's the, that's the grand risk, right? And I think, I, I don't hate that per se, but as it's happening, um, doesn't feel great.

But then again, in some ways, like, that's, it's a necessary vulnerability.

LYNN XU: I don't like the emphasis on the author at readings, which is the convention. The author reads their work and there's a kind of authenticity to the experience of listening which is attached to the personality of the writer. Uh, and I find this to be troubling mainly because this is not at all how I relate to my poems.

That said, I do like giving voice to my poems, to poems in general. And I find this to be a wholly separate kind of art that I'm very interested in.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I've had some beautiful, funny, weird, wild experiences at poetry readings, including the time Ross Gay tossed fresh figs out of a paper bag into a large audience at the New School before reading his poem about figs. The time A Huge horse written by a blind equestrian entered... I know this sounds like a dream I had, but it's actually happened. The blind equestrian Riding a horse entered Jupiter Hammond's barn on Long Island, in which a room full of underdressed New York City poets were listening to Richard Howard read. And then the horse defecated all over the floor, and the freezing poets, including me, foolishly began crying out in terror and trying to stand on folding chairs.

[19:57]

Which is never a good idea. I've got so many stories about uninvited non human animals at poetry readings. About crying in the bathroom stall before reading for the first and so far only time with Alice Notley. About Jorie Graham helping John Ashbery up onto the stage. About reading with Jorie in a small venue on the Lower East Side.

During which she insistently turned off the spotlight on her so that we were reading in near darkness instead. I haven't talked very much about this part of my life on Commonplace, but it's a really important part of my life. In March of this year, I gave an IRL reading at the Lower East Side Bookstore and event space, P.T. Knitwear, with poet Will Harris, author of the newly published *Brother Poem*, and poet José Oliveres, author of the newly published *Promises of Gold*. There was a ton going on for me that night. I hadn't done a live reading in a very long time. I'd never read with Harris or Oliveres, had read Harris's newest book just a few days earlier on the plane home from Seattle, and I hadn't even gotten a copy of Oliveres's book *Promises of Gold* yet.

Early the next morning, I was flying internationally and very freaked out about that. I was worried about catching COVID or giving someone COVID at the reading. I'd never been to the location before, I didn't know the organizers, and I didn't understand what my role was. The reading program and advertisement said that this was an event in honor of the release of Will Harris new book, and that he'd be in conversation with me and José Oliveras.

So I wasn't sure if they were expecting me to read from my own work or interview Harris. I asked the venue if they were planning to record the reading, and if so, could I use the audio for a possible Commonplace episode? I had this idea that I could just record the reading and then just do a tiny little bit of editing and sound audio massaging and then present it as an episode, and this would be totally fascinating to all the Commonplace listeners.

It was a long subway ride and walk from my home in Washington Heights. I stopped at three stores on the way to the venue to find some mints because I felt like I had really bad breath underneath my mask. But all the bodegas have been replaced with dispensaries and only edibles, some as mints, were to be found.

It was, to say the least, an odd reading. I did not buy THC or CBD mints. That's not what made it weird. It was very sparsely attended. Too many bookstore employees, not enough book buyers. I think there were about three people in the audience, which, for three readers, is a very weird feeling. José read first, then introduced me.

As I stood up to read, my watch... sent me two alerts. This is the only time this has ever happened. My heart rate had shot up into the 180s. I had no idea I was so nervous. I was really surprised. Anyway, I read two long poems, one new, one old, and then I introduced Will Harris. After Will read, we sat in a row facing these three members of the audience, uh, with microphones, and we talked.

I, of course, asked Will, uh, initially, had he ever been romantically involved with another only child, and then told him about the extreme intensity of my post-marriage relationship and breakup with a man who, like me, is an only child. Will and José seemed confused, to say the least, about what this had to do with poetry, but I could not stop talking about it.

I remember being entranced and moved by Will and José's readings while we were reading. And sort of by the odd, but interesting conversation we had afterward. But when I listened back to the recorded audio, it was boring, embarrassing, poor sound quality. It was really hard to listen to and listening to it and trying to make it

into a Commonplace episode reminded me of choreographer Hope Mohr saying “video of dance is a poor simulacrum.”

I don't know why I have to learn this lesson over and over again, but you can't just record a live reading and play it on your RSS feed and have it be a good podcast episode.

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: The Bryant Park reading series is unlike other reading series because it's outdoors, which creates a little bit of terror because of the weather is always threatening to do something awful to you. Um, it's in a space that's heavily trafficked. So there's a, there's a way in which you are sequestered and isolated in the reading room.

[25:03]

Like clearly this space has been marked out for you, but you're also reading to whoever's walking past and there are just people kind of coming in and going out. And it feels very New York to me that it's this sort of pop up experience that's part of many other experiences, but embedded in this certain way that's also because it's outside... precarious that you're always worried - is it going to rain? Is it going to rain?

CATE MARVIN: [Sirens in the background]. The last time I read for this series was easily 15 years ago. I think it might have actually been in 2005. So nearly 20 years ago and this was pre-cell phone. And, um, so I had a bunch of my poems with me, and some of them were even typewritten. They were the only original copies of the poem, because I used to write all my poems on a manual typewriter.

And, um, and, uh, it was an outdoor reading, and my poems started to blow away. And it was totally terrifying, and people in the audience gasped, but fortunately I managed to... hang on to the poem that was blowing away that I thought at the time was so very precious but it turned out to probably not be a very good one.

So that's the last time I read here and I have to say I feel a little bit of anxiety about reading in this setting because it just seems like a very strange place to be reading poems, but whatever you've got to do what you got to do.

R.A. VILLANUEVA: So why did I agree to do this reading in Bryant Park? First and foremost I was excited by the possibility of sharing work to a crowd that wasn't ostensibly gathered in a bookstore for a launch or a Q&A. I think there's something so lovely about the freedom of people not having to buy tickets. They just kind of circulate and move and listen and, um, live their lives with us in the background or in the foreground of that moment.

What an honor to find oneself welcomed into the sort of everyday flow of someone else's life. It is rare, it is extraordinary to take part in a reading series that's, that is so... kind of like free-form, and it's being embedded in people just passing through and listening and moving through, right? Like, they're doing it of their own, um, curiosity and their own connection beyond. The venue is life.

LYNN XU: I don't love doing readings, but I do like it as a kind of communal practice. Um, and as I tend to read with other poets, what I like best is to listen to the other readers, which is always a treat.

I just took part in Eileen's *Pathetic Happening* at St. Mark's last Sunday, and it was amazing. A lot of writers read their own pieces from the anthology, and a lot of other writers, artists, musicians, performers, etc. took on reading works by others. I read an excerpt from Kafka's *Letter to his Father*, for example, and there were four stages with simultaneous performances, and the evening went on, oh, I don't know, for 8 or 9 hours. I didn't stay the whole time because our whole family was there.

And it was one of those events where there were dogs and babies and the freedom to be promiscuous and move around. It was... a truly beautiful poetry island, a multiverse in dimension, time, language, improvisation, spontaneity, and friendship.

RACHEL ZUCKER: The last time I read in the Bryant Park reading series was 2015. I can't remember who was hosting, and forgive me, there may have been a

fourth reader as well. But I know it was me, Wayne Kostenbaum, and Jason Schneiderman who were slated to read. And what I remember is that I really, really wanted to read something that Wayne and Jason would like.

Something a bit daring and risqué. Wayne had been my teacher as an undergrad at Yale, and has been incredibly supportive of my work over the years. I wanted to impress him. I wanted to show up for him and Jason. Also, I'd been working on my lecture on confessional poetry, and thinking about direct address, and how Jason and Wayne were part of my coterie.

[29:54]

I spent most of the days and nights leading up to that reading writing and editing two poems, “Confessional” and “Planet Hulk,” that would later become central in my book *Sound Machine*. So here I was again with a chance to show up for or show off for Jason and for or with Kate, Ron, and Lynn. For me, picking what to read is a balance of wanting to read new work, work that is appropriate or delightfully inappropriate for the expected audience.

And perhaps most importantly, I choose what to read as part of a lifelong, loving, engaged conversation with other poets and their work. So on June 6th, I arrived early at Bryant Park with my audio equipment. I was coming directly from teaching the intensive summer poetry workshop at NYU that I've taught in for many, many years. It's a program called Writers in New York.

I hadn't done many public readings since COVID, but I felt okay about this one since it was outside. Although, when I got out of the subway near Bryant Park, I could not figure out what was going on with the sky. It seemed unnaturally dark for 5:15 in the summer, and there was a funny smell.

When I got to what's called The Reading Room, I saw Cate Marvin sitting on a park bench, talking into the speaker end of her phone. She waved at me, indicating that she was recording responses to my questions. I talk to the sound guy, to Jason, to some students of mine. I set up my phone on a tripod and then I try to just sit down and settle my nerves.

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: The audience is wonderful and they, I think, I don't really know who the audience is. I have never surveyed them. My sense is that they're a combination of the literati, the people who pay attention to what free culture there is in New York - you know the old joke about New York, you have to have time or money.

If you have time, you can see amazing things and wait in line, figure out where the good things are, if you have money. You can afford to go see an 800 Broadway musical. But the audience is wonderful. They tend to be very devoted to the authors. They tend to be very interested and very engaged. They buy a lot of books.

I do think that there is something special about live readings to the point where when we had to move to Zoom for COVID on KGB, I did not want to do recordings. I did not want to have an archive of recordings because I thought that the specialness exists in the moment. In the, in the moment of, you know, you can watch a recording of a Broadway musical, but it's not the same, right?

I mean, the whole point of the Broadway musical or cabaret actually is probably a better analog... Because when you go to cabaret, if you love cabaret, and I love cabaret, um, the recordings are often not good because it takes a lot of production to make a recording sound good. And if you're just watching, you know, someone with their iPhone recording whoever it is that's singing at Joe's Pub, whether it's Martha Graham Cracker or Justin Vivian Bond or Patti LuPone or Bridget Everett, you get a sense of what it was like, but you don't really have the full experience. Right?

The, the, that aura, that specialness is really in the space in being there together. But I am, I'm glad that I, that I did end up recording those and I think that that archive has become a really beautiful archive and I was able to introduce Richard McCann, who supported me very early in my career and to be able to introduce him and for him to respond to that was really beautiful. And then he died very shortly after I had not realized how sick he was. And having that video is actually a really nice thing to be able to return to.

CATE MARVIN: One of the greatest things about doing readings is that you get to read with other people. And it's a real honor because sometimes you'll get their fans or their friends coming and hearing you speak. But then you also get to hear like really wonderful poems by other people and be part of that and that's so exciting. After you know, a lot of the work we do is totally alone and and in solitude and um, so it's really great to see other people doing their thing and it gives me like a lot of hope and inspiration.

[34:40]

R.A. VILLANUEVA: I want to be careful about where I start and where things off. Especially since the audience is going to be largely composed of strangers out there in the world walking through Bryant Park. Curious, some people are there on purpose, some people are not, they're coming from work, they're leaving work. And so it, it feels like a chance to engage in poetry in a space that's not specialized.

I have to open up with something that will activate me and activate them. Um, something that is immediate. It's gotta be immediate, right? Like, I don't want the more, I don't know, esoteric or obscure poems in my collections to, to, to be the ones I highlight. I want to think about what it might feel for someone to encounter a piece first in the air, in my voice, with my breath, um, as it combines with and, uh, collides with and clashes with the noise of Manhattan.

LYNN XU: I like the idea of participating in something that takes place in a public and outdoor space in the middle of the city, where the audience may not necessarily be a poetry audience, and where many modes of listening and attention can be activated and, put in play.

From June 6, 2023 Bryant Park Reading Recoding

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: All right. It's six o'clock. We can get started. You're a beautiful audience. You're filling in. Have a seat. If you're milling about, um, we're very friendly. This is, um, poetry in Bryant park. We're here every Tuesday at 6 p. m. Um, this is our second week. And...

RACHEL ZUCKER: I really know what this episode is. It's not a conversation. It's not the recording of a reading, although you're about to hear excerpts from the reading. Maybe it's an audio essay? I don't know. I know that I've been listening to this audio for months, letting it lead me working with it the way I work with language on the page. I've got more episodes coming up on the same theme of performance, including an incredible one with Fred Moten and Ronaldo Wilson, as well as some more traditionally formatted, but never very traditional conversations with Laurel Snyder, Mary Ruefle, and a guest hosted conversation with Charif Shanahan and Safia Elhelou.

We've got great books to give away to members of the Commonplace Book Club for this episode, including Jason Schneiderman's *Hold Me Tight*, courtesy of Red Hen Press; Cate Marvin's *Event Horizon*, courtesy of Copper Canyon; R. A. Villanueva's *Reliquaria*, courtesy of University of Nebraska Press; Lynn Xu's *And Those Ashen Heaps that Canilevered Vase of Moonlight*, courtesy of Wave Books, Jose Olivera's *Promises of Gold*, courtesy of Henry Holt, and Will Harris's *Brother Poem*, courtesy of Wesleyan University Press.

All [Patrons](#) will get access to the full video of this reading available on the Commonplace YouTube channel. My goal with this episode was to give you, Commonplace listener, a sense of what it felt like to be there on June 6th, 2023, with Jason, Cate, Ron, Lynn, and the members of the audience. To be outside in a large, bustling, public New York City park, a block away from the New York Public Library and midtown Manhattan, as the sky turned sepia from the wildfires in Canada.

To be there reading and listening to poetry together before our West Coast friends told us to wear masks outside or better yet, get the hell inside. This is when we were worried about the possibility of rain, or our poems flying away in the wind, or boring the audience. Thank you for being part of my gathered congregation.

Recording of June 6, 2023 Bryant Park Reading

[39:10]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: And, um, we're going to jump right into our readings. Um, we have Cate Marvin, R.A. Villanueva, uh, Rachel Zucker, and Lynn Xu. And we will go straight through. I will be doing introductions, um, make sure that you do read the bios on the flyer. Um, the introductions I give are a little bit different than those.

It's important to know what they published, and where they went to school, and all the prizes they've won. But my interests are a little bit different. And, um, please do buy books. Um, the wonderful Kinokuniya Bookstore is here with all of the author's titles, um, I'm including my own. And everyone will hang out afterwards, and we would love to sign the books for you.

Um, I always, I'll, I'll make this joke because it might end up on, uh, Rachel's podcast, which is, you can't take the poets home, but you can take the books home [laughs]. That's okay.

Alright, our first reader is Cate Marvin. Um, Cate Marvin is a force of American poetry, an absolute dynamo whose take-no-prisoners poems might require us to replace the word *confessionalism* with *confrontationalism*.

In Marvin's work there is a clear-eyed analysis that is often tinged with a dynamic frustration and a propulsive anger, a kind of directness that bends the lyric with its own gravity. Please welcome Cate Marvin.

[Applause]

CATE MARVIN: Hi everybody. Can you hear me okay? Is this good? Um, I'm gonna start out with a few new poems. Actually, really in response to Jason's introduction, because I was like, *oh, okay, then I will read that super confessional poem that I was hesitant to share*. Um, so this is, um, a poem that, um, I don't even know how to introduce these poems.

I'm so happy to be here with these poets. It's so exciting to be reading here. I read here in 2005 and it was very terrifying because this wind came and almost blew my

poems away. And so, I'm just, it's not doing that now. So this is a poem called "Pleasure." And, um, I think you'll see where it's coming from.

[Cate Marvin reads "[Pleasure](#)"]

I've never read that poem aloud. So, thanks for being there with me. Um, so I'm going to, um, transition into a poem from my book. And, um, this is a poem about my kid. Actually, I'm going to, there's a poem I'm going to read before this that will sort of fit well into it. And this is called, it's called "In Storage."

[44:20]

[Cate reads "In Storage"]

A lot of poems in my fourth book, there's a bunch of poems about my kid, and what was complicated about it was, they were a daughter for a really long time, and they are no longer a daughter. And so, um, so I had to, like, transition, I transitioned, I transitioned them in the final poem. And, um, this poem is called "They, Them, Theirarchy." And it's in three parts.

[Cate reads "[They, Them, Theirarchy](#)"]

And I'm going to end there. Thank you for listening.

[Applause]

[49:33]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: Our next reader is R.A. Villanueva. And when I call Ron Villanueva a poet of decency, what I mean is that his work is suffused with a quality of kindness that is rarely rewarded, but that we find in our best hours. Villanueva's work is narrative; we're visiting events and stories in ways that both interrogate and heal, and in writing about fatherhood, brings a generosity and gentleness that recognizes how hard it is to find a place in this world and in making that place for his child among the ghosts of the past finds a place for the reader.

Please welcome R.A. Villanueva.

[Applause]

[50:17]

R.A. VILLANUEVA: Hi everyone. Uh [laughs], when Jason was giving that, that introduction, I felt like I was at my eulogy. I was hearing my eulogy.

Thank you for being here, everyone.

[R.A. Villanueva reads "[Fish Heads](#)"]

I'm going to read poems from something new. I hope one day this will be a book. Yeah, so I'm a dad now. That happened like seven years ago. Um, and so, it's bizarre to think of changing polarities from writing as the son inheriting things to the father maybe messing my children up. Uh, and so, uh, these are poems.

My first one's about my daughter.

Uh, before the only thing that could put her to bed was, uh, *We Don't Talk About Bruno*, like, on endless loop, the only thing that could put her to sleep was an endless loop of Rufus Wainwright's version of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*. It's from Shrek. It's not like she's really classy. She's, it's from Shrek [laughs].

R.A. Villanueva reads "[Hallelujah sings the choir and I](#)"]

And for my son. The title is "Annus Mirabilis," which in Latin means Year of Miracles.

[54:33]

[R.A. Villanueva reads "[Annus Mirabilis](#)"].

[Applause]

Last poem? Thank you for listening. Um, so, you have a line, and this side of, I was gonna say the room, the universe, you, you, you have a line. Are we ready? The answer is yes. Yes? Okay, okay. Your line is, the world has always been ending. And your reply is, yes.

This poem is called “Mass.”

[R.A. Villanueva reads “[Mass](#)”]

[Applause]

Thank you.

[1:00:23]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: As you can imagine, as the host of an outdoor reading series, I start obsessively checking the weather, um, over the weekend. And Apple weather actually thinks it's raining right now, right here. Um, which is interesting, but it also had the description that today is of concern for sensitive groups, and I was like, we're poets, like, that's, like, that's our job description, sensitive group.

Um, anyway, our next reader is Lynn Xu. I'm really excited to welcome Lynn Xuhere. She is a dynamic and fascinating poet often discussed in association with intellectual movements like critical theory and surrealism, the influences make her work a kind of shifting prism, a wrought object or faceted gem that shines a new light depending on how the jewel is held.

On the page, Xu's work often cuts back against itself, resonances lingering as when a tuning fork is struck to orient the musician, but the audience continues to hear its vibration as the orchestra plays forward. I'm very excited, please welcome Lynn Xu.

[Applause]

LYNN XU:: Thank you for accommodating my height, and thank you so much, Jason. That was so beautiful. I wish, I wish it does that. I mean, thank you. I hope it does that. Um, so, I'm gonna, I decided today I would sort of put together a range of bouquet of sunflowers, Um, for us, um, which means that some of them are not mine.

Um, I'm going to read three sunflowers that are not mine and then one longer sunflower, um, that is mine. And the first sunflower is by William Blake.

[Lynn reads "[Ah! Sun-flower](#)" by William Blake]

Oh, thank you, thank you.

Um, and these two are, I don't know if you know the poet June Jordan, she, um, actually went to school at Barnard and then, um, taught at a variety of places and, and towards the end of her life, she died in 2002, um, and she was teaching at UC Berkeley and I began, I, I began going to UC Berkeley in 2002 and, um, so, but I knew her from the, she started Poetry for the People, and she has two Sunflower Sonnets that she wrote over the course of many years. So they don't really kind of move together in time, but they move together in, um, in other ways.

[1:03:35]

[Lynn reads "[Sunflower Sonnet Number One](#)" and "[Sunflower Sonnet Number Two](#)" by June Jordan]

I also want to thank the other readers because I think it's a gift to hear you all. I mean, I've never heard you all read. And I've read your work, so I, it's, thank you for giving me that gift. Okay, so this is my, um, sunflower.

So this book, um, and those ashen heaps, *That Cantilevered Vase of Moonlight* is a book-length poem. And I'm going to read you the postscript of that book, uh, this book. And I, I wonder if you would mind closing your eyes. I read to you with your eyes closed because you can hear the city. I mean, the city is so alive in the listening.

[1:05:42]

[Lynn reads from *That Cantilevered Vase of Moonlight*]

Okay, thank you so much.

[Applause]

[1:09:14]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: And let's have a round of applause for Bryant Park and all the people who make this possible! For Chip, who makes the sound, um, seem easy. Uh, for John, our bookseller, which is a true skill. Um, and Gemma, who's been coordinating everything. And Nancy, who isn't here right now, but makes everything run smoothly. Um, and our final reader for tonight, um, and please do stay, please do buy books, and all of the readers will be around to sign them for you, um, is Rachel Zucker.

And when my first book came out, my mother expressed surprise and admiration for how completely I had revealed myself on the page. And if I could go back and have that conversation again, I'd say, *no, actually, I withheld a lot of myself. You must be thinking of Rachel Zucker*. In Rachel's work, a kind of radical honesty prevails, and it creates a propulsive force to her work, a powerful demand for discovery that envelops the reader in its force.

Across multiple genres and through interdisciplinary works, Zucker's singular voice treats truth as the apex of ethics. And when Muriel Rukeyser said that if one woman told the truth about her life, the world would split open, well, Rachel did, and the world feels pretty split open right now. Please welcome Rachel Zucker.

[Applause]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so, um, I taught a class earlier today. Some of my students are here. And I have a lot of students in this gathering, including some students who I taught, um, at the 92nd Street Y in 2011, who have been meeting

together without me since. Which might be one of my greatest accomplishments, like to teach myself out of the room. And then I have another student who was in my online only.

Um, he, so the heterosexuality is not going great for me [laughter] And, uh, so here's another poem on the same theme.

[Rachel reads “The language of lovemaking”]

Um, I'm gonna, I'm gonna just read two very, very short poems and end, and these poems I wrote, uh, I, so after the romantic interlude with the aforementioned six-pack owning Pacific Northwest dude, I went to a silent retreat that was very quiet compared to this, and, it's shocking, but I actually was silent for seven days.

And it was fantastic, and it was, it was, it was incredible, and I'm still processing this experience, and, um. Yeah, I meditated, like, I don't know, like six hours a day. It was wild. It was, it was totally incredible. And so now all the poems I've written since just sound like Jane Hirshfield or something. Like, I don't know what to say. This is like a new thing.

So, “Nothing is as is alone.”

[Rachel Reads “Nothing is as is alone”]

And I'll just read this one final poem, which is really actually a sincere love poem, maybe the most sincere love poem I've ever written. Hi, Laura. I just, I just noticed a person. And it's called “On the Hindrance of Attachment,” which, if you don't know, is like, attachment is a problem of sorts in Buddhism because... you're attached rather than in the present moment and unattached, but at the same time attachment is maybe all I believe in, really?

Um, so how do you remain in that contradiction, in that space in which attachment is everything and also nothing and something to work on your whole life to be deeply attached to others and also something to work on your whole life to be not attached. And this poem is for Michael.

[Rachel Reads “On the Hindrance of Attachment”]

Thank you.

[Applause]

[1:16:57]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: Alright, another round of applause for our readers.

[Applause] Um, we will see you back here next Tuesday at 6 p. m. with Mark Doty, Octavia Gonzalez, Lynn Melnick, and Martha Rhodes. And please do stay...

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, why did you come to the reading today?

ATTENDEE #1: Uh, to be honest, I came because of you, because I've read your books for a long time, and I both admire them and kind of hate them, because I don't know how you do what you do, and it drives me crazy [laughs]. But also, I... I mean, I wanted to hear the other poets as well, but, um, honestly, you were, you were the big draw for me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so, um, when you say, like, “I don't know how you do it,” did you hope maybe that you would, like, figure that out by seeing me read in person?

ATTENDEE #1: Uh, I don't think I thought I would figure it out by hearing you read. I don't know it's something you could actually answer for me either but um, but I just wanted to say it and and maybe you could answer it, I'm not sure, but I just really admire the way you you sound so very natural and conversational, but it's obviously so beautifully crafted, so like, how does that work?

And the, and the intimacy, I mean, is really amazing to me. I really admire it. I'm trying to get there myself. But anyway, I just, I love, I love your work.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Alright, I love that. Okay, hold on, I'm going to sign your book. Hey Ian, How would you feel about, uh, showing up to some people and saying, *Rachel would like to know why you're here?*

IAN FISCHMAN: Sure.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Put these on. It's recording...

RACHEL ZUCKER: This has been episode 116 of Commonplace with Jason Schneiderman, Cate Marvin, R.A. Villanueva, Lynn Xu, and me, Rachel Zucker. Many thanks to Red Hen Press, Copper Canyon, University of Nebraska Press, and Wave Books. Thank you to the poets for their generous and fascinating responses, to the audience, to the Bryant Park Reading Series, and to my favorite deputy, Ian Fischman.

IAN FISCHMAN: Excuse me. Um, Rachel has deputized me with her equipment. Um, and she would like to know why you came to attend this reading tonight?

ATTENDEE #2: Well, because of her, of course! We're actually two of the people she mentioned that taught, That she taught at the 92nd Street Y, and so, um, as a teacher, she was wonderful, and, and it was the first time I have heard of her, and ever since I've been really enjoying her work. So, I couldn't miss a chance to see her in person.

ATTENDEE #3: We were, it was 2011, so it's quite remarkable that we still get together, and, uh, it must be because Rachel picked us to be together.

[1:19:50]

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN: Well, that is so wonderful that you two, um, do that together. I was a student of hers in college.

[More conversation with attendees]

IAN FISCHERMAN: Excuse me.

I have been deputized by Rachel. Um, to go around and ask people, um, for her podcast why they came to this reading tonight. Any answer is permissible.

ATTENDEE #4: I had to go to the cardiologist so I didn't have to go to my evening job. So it was an opportunity.

ATTENDEE #5: He never gets to come with me because he's usually working. But today... My friend sent me a Facebook message and said, Hey, if you're going to go to the Bryant Park poetry reading series this summer, let me know. Maybe we can meet up. And I was like, Oh yeah, I'm kind of recovering from the academic year. I sort of have like a whiplash still because we just turned in grades recently.

And I was like, so I'm reorienting myself to summer. I'm like, *Oh yeah, the Bryant Park poetry series*. Cause I, I love coming to it. So, um, it's amazing. It's outside, it's beautiful, you know, listen to poetry or look at the famous poet up there, they're like right here, so it's amazing.

IAN FISCHERMAN:: Hello, Rachel has asked me to ask folks here, um, why they came to attend this poetry reading.

ATTENDEE #6: For class. For class. For class. We love class. Yeah. For, I mean, I wouldn't have said to get out of the smog, but, for class.

IAN FISCHERMAN: The smog is very noticeable today.

Excuse me, did you attend this reading? Um, I'm a former student of hers, and she's asked me to go around and, uh, inquire with folks about, um, what drew them to this reading tonight, and it's okay if you don't want to answer as well.

ATTENDEE #7: Yeah, I um came to see Cate Marvin, but I was late. Um, and, but I was so glad to hear Rachel, because that's the first time I've heard her read, and, um...

I just thought it was, um, amusingly shocking and really drew me in with her, her play on language that would normally seem, uh, vulgar or outrageous, you know.

IAN FISCHERMAN: I really enjoy that about her work too. Well, thank you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Thank you to the patrons who support the show and to you, listener. Thank you for listening