

NEPANTLA INTERVIEWS:

Rickey Laurentiis & Carl Phillips

In the following interview poets Rickey Laurentiis and Carl Phillips discuss Ferguson, outsidership, literary responsibility, and each other's newest collections of poetry! Rickey Laurentiis is the author of *Boy with Thorn*, selected by Terrance Hayes for the 2014 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, newly released from University of Pittsburgh Press. Carl Phillips is the author of *Reconnaissance*, newly released from Farrar, Straus and Giroux in Summer 2015. Carl Phillips teaches at Washington University in St. Louis, where Rickey Laurentiis completed his MFA.

Rickey Laurentiis: Before having this chance to read *Reconnaissance*, the last book of yours I'd read was your second collection of essays, *The Art of Daring*, which I think you were finishing up around the time I was completing my courses at Washington University. As I reread both books—the book of poems and book of essays—I couldn't help but notice more than a few connections and repetitions between the two texts that were exciting to me. For instance, in the last essay of *The Art of Daring*, "Foliage," you prepare its conclusion by including the poem "The Darker Powers," which now virtually opens *Reconnaissance* as its second poem. "Foliage," too, is the title of not just that essay but also a poem in your latest book. "Little Gods of Making" is the title as well of the second essay in *Daring* and is also a phrase that comes up again in a poem in *Reconnaissance*, and I'm sure there are other connections I haven't yet picked up. I wonder if you could speak a little about this. *The Art of Daring*, essentially, argues for—even as it complicates—a kind of sexual and imaginative restlessness, naming it crucial to the project of the artist, and then insists that even in the comfort/discomfort that might attend such a restlessness, the artist must *dare* to move into that dark space, so to speak, both for the sake of her art *and* for the chance of living a truly full life. So, I wonder if writing *The Art of Daring* and pushing forward those ideas lead you more closely to the poems you'd eventually write and collect in *Reconnaissance*? Did you "dare yourself" into a new kind of poem, or way at arriving at a poem?

Carl Phillips: Those connections you notice between the two books are ones I myself only noticed later. All of the essays in *The Art of Daring*—except for the very last one—were written years before I wrote the poems of *Reconnaissance*. I don't believe I was daring myself to write those poems—it's more like the way I've always connected writing—and living—to daring has made me write the poems I do, and no doubt influences the poems I'm attracted to when I sit down to write an essay. But, to cite an example, yes, there is a poem called "Foliage" in *Reconnaissance*—it came out of a troubled incident of violence, one I don't discuss in the essays. But the more I thought about the incident, the more I started questioning the role of daring, especially if it leads to trouble, and that way of thinking led me to the final essay, which meditates on that subject—hence, I called it "Foliage." And since I was quoting my own poems in that essay, and wanted to include one that concerned power and the possible costs of it, I included "The Darker Powers," which appears in *Recon*... Other times, connections just came by accident—the phrase "Little god of making" in a later poem is indeed the title of an early essay—but I hadn't thought that, while

writing the poem. Maybe it just shows that I have a limited handful of thoughts in my head, lol.... That title, by the way, is a phrase that Charles Rowell used, in a telephone conversation, when he was describing what human beings are.

Okay, on to a question, a tad multi-headed, regarding your book, though this one is more general as a starter: You may well have already found that, as a queer poet of color, it seems impossible to avoid issues of influence and identity when people consider the writing. At this point, there's a substantial tradition of such writing, ranging from Essex Hemphill to Audre Lorde to Cyrus Cassells to Jericho Brown—I suppose I'm somewhere in there, myself—and then there are the newest writers such as yourself but also Phillip Williams, Danez Smith, to name just a few...So, I'm wondering how you see your work taking on that considerable tradition, making it new, but also maintaining/sustaining it. You fuse sexuality and race, something in common with that tradition, but your work stands out in certain ways that have to do with its relationship to so-called white literary traditions, also to a particularly Southern tradition that hasn't always known what to do with sexuality, it seems to me; you also seem to have a particular concern with history, that of the American South. This is a sprawl of a question, but I'd love to hear what you have to say about any of its parts....

Laurentiis: Interesting that Mr. Rowell offered that phrase to you in a conversation. Because when I read it—both as the title of the essay, and later in the poem—it spun me right over to the memory of reading Frank Bidart's little chapbook, "Music Like Dirt." I think there he puts forward the argument that at least one "meaning" to life, human life anyway, is our insistence on and ability to make: whether it be via the relationships we build, the children we raise, the art that can come to speak for us. Of course, anything we make, at least as I'm seeing it, comes with a potential threat of "overpowering" us—the story of Zeus and Cronus comes to mind, or even Frankenstein—or, maybe it's that it comes with the knowledge that whatever we make can very easily take on a credible life of its own, outside us, even without us. Maybe that's the daring part of it, too? That we should continue to make, despite this uncomfortable knowledge?

But, anyway, that I did think of Frank Bidart seems a little bit connected to your question regarding tradition, even though I recognize Bidart is not a man of color, though he's queer.... I guess it proves your point all the same that issues of influence can be "unavoidable." But in my life, as in my writing, I've tried hard *not* to avoid them. I think about Baldwin—when he was asked once about being black, gay and growing up poor in Harlem—and how he said he had "hit the jackpot." There's a little bit of—what?—sad irony in that statement, too, but it nevertheless seems true. The tradition you speak of is a really fascinating intersection, one that seems to render even the most quotidian parts of a life hyper-visible, maybe because it's those very quotidian parts of life that queer people of color have, historically, been denied. Very little, it seems to me, is taken for granted in this tradition: not pain, pleasure, the future, history, language itself.... That's some of the things I've learned from all the people you've named, including yourself, and one way I hope to sustain it—just to remain vigilant, and curious, almost crudely skeptical and open to all possible ideas, if at least temporarily. But then there are ways I hope to push the tradition further, to the extent any one person can. Even as I admire the tendency to always question "the normal" that I find in queer writing of color, I'm also as

attracted to the sense of assured authority that, say, someone like Wallace Stevens seems to command in his work. That's probably a reason he even appears in my book. I guess it's a balancing act I'm after.

I keep returning to one poem, especially, in *Reconnaissance* called "Discipline." It's one of the shorter ones in the book, and in some ways exemplifies the balance that I just referred to. "You are the knife, / and you are also what the knife / has opened," it ends—not in a question, but a statement. And yet the "also"—or rather, the fact that "you" are not just one singular thing, but *also this*—complicates the statement. Authority, yes, and yet the poem remains open, at least to me. The simplest question for you is—how? How do you manage to do that, or is it less of a managing and more of just the way your mind thinks? The other question, though, is why? Would it be worth it, valid even, for a queer poet of color to outright, and with no hesitation, command the authority that, again, someone like Stevens (or Frost, or Eliot, or Dickinson, whoever) seems to yield, to say absolutely "This is how it is, what I know"?

Phillips: For me, to say "you are the knife and you are also what the knife has opened" is in fact a statement of absolute authority—absolute, and authentic, I would add. The problem with the authority of such figures as Stevens, whom you mention, is that there's no apparent uncertainty, hence no hint of either vulnerability or culpability. That's a particularly 'white' stance of a certain generation in particular, one that's never had to imagine being called into question about anything. I believe the only thing that makes authority credible is the facing up to the fact that all knowing is slippery, and irresolvable. By my knife statement, I think I mean that we are usually not just the sufferer, we are often implicated in our suffering—which is different from being responsible for it.... In my book, anyway, I think one thing I'm investigating, in my sort of reconnaissance of a landscape I thought I knew, is this idea of figuring out how much we want to own, when it comes to our own flaws—not every flaw, necessarily, has to be erased or somehow transcended or therapied away; and perhaps looking at things more squarely allows us to know ourselves better, including those sides that some might find less attractive....

Meanwhile, I fear my question led you to think there was some need to avoid influence. What I mean is that readers—critics—are so quick to try to pin down a writer when it comes to various aspects of identity, sexuality, race, region, and also in terms of literary influence. I agree that there is no reason to avoid these—it makes sense to approach and learn from them, it seems to me. Also, so much of these things are who we are—how can we avoid ourselves, and why would we want to? But I've seen how these aspects can also be a tool for narrowing one's identity—a tool used by others, I mean. And I think it's challenging to sort out our own relationship to these things and to stick with that, undisturbed by the very readers whom we at the same time hope for, somewhere. Anyway, I will approach from another angle: what is the southern gothic, for Rickey Laurentiis? And in particular, how does this translate into poetry, when it's been a tradition more associated with fiction? I would argue that, in its weird way, Stevens's "Like Decoration in a Nigger Cemetery" is a queasy southern gothic, filtered through a decidedly New England sensibility—and then you re-envision, re-configure that poem, in your "Of the Leaves That Have Fallen."

Laurentiis: Yeah, I see your point. I think you're right that so much of the authority that figures like Stevens presume they can take is inevitably bound up in their particular subjectivities—that is, their whiteness, which seems adamant to always want to understand itself as central, and I'd probably add, in this particular case, maleness, too. Which is why I find being a part of the specific tradition you named earlier so fascinating and, in some real sense, powerful, as one can inevitably see much more—can see a fuller picture—from the margins than from the center. I suppose I'm guilty of being at times seduced by that so-called authority, even as I want to—as you have just done—critique it, or reveal its limitations. I wasn't conscious of it, but in retrospect I can see that's probably what I was up to in a poem like "Of the Leaves that Have Fallen." Cannibalizing Stevens' form, literally stealing and reprinting whole lines of his poem—this seemed to give me access, if briefly, to the kind of unquestioned, elevated tone he so often assumes . . . but it also gave me a form to add to, even radically revise and critique his discourse, which is ultimately most satisfying to me.

As for what the Southern Gothic means to me, well, increasingly it means more and more. The southern landscape has always impressed, even as it's terrified me. I hold both these contradictory feelings as true. And, because of my experience with Hurricane Katrina, I know firsthand that that landscape can at any moment—as if magically—be changed, erased even. So, it's as much a fictive as an actual landscape that's in my mind. I also grew up reading the landscape as written in Southern Gothic fiction: Harper Lee, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and, even though she's from Ohio, I always want to put Toni Morrison on that list. Through them, I came to see the Southern Gothic as a kind of imaginative crucible where all the manners of identity (race, class, gender, body, sex, etc) intersect, in fact sometimes violently collide. You mentioned earlier how the Southern tradition, to you, hasn't seemed to know what to do with sexuality, but I think in some ways I disagree. At least when it comes to this literature I'm referencing, these books were among the first places I encountered the "outsider," the "queer," the "freak," which at least to me always seemed like codes for the sexual deviant. It's the first place where I saw bodies behaving differently or inconsistent with "moral" or "natural" law. Bodies touched each other, sometimes in pleasure or violence, sometimes both. They "spooked" each other. Some bodies even returned from the dead. All of this fascinates me and, with my poetry, I wanted to find a way, if there was a way, to localize this into the intimate space of the lyric poem. That's why in one of my first poem you have a decapitated head that, incongruously, is still thinking—and not just that, he wants to think "stranger stuff." But, like Southern Gothic fiction, I don't want to float too far off into pure fantasy. I try to stay tethered: to use the gothic, strangely unreal qualities of the genre to critique quite real issues of identity, or desire or history, as best as I can.

You talked about your book as a reconnaissance of a landscape you thought you knew, by which I think you mean both a kind of mental and emotional space—but there's also a physical one. You've mentioned a New England sensibility with regard to Stevens, but that also strikes me as true for your work. Could you say more? How does that sensibility and the particular landscapes associated with it inform or affect your work? Does a phrase like "New England Gothic" resonate with you?

Phillips: I see what you mean about sexuality having always been there in the Southern gothic. I think that wasn't as apparent to me—the “freak,” yes, but sexuality didn't seem the key marker, at least in the Faulkner and Lee I read, though I now think of Blanche in Williams's *Streetcar*. Does he count as Southern gothic, I wonder, given that he's from Missouri? And then there's Flannery O'Connor, my favorite among those writers, but again sexuality is usually not the issue...Maybe some of this is generational, too, though—I never knew “queer” to refer to anything other than gay, homosexual, until I was maybe in my 40s. The queerness you speak of is everywhere, yes, in the Southern gothic, I agree.

Interesting choice, to include Toni Morrison in the Southern gothic—makes sense to me. And when you mention the talking decapitated head in the opening poem of *Boy with Thorn*, it makes me remember what also occurred to me when I read it, namely the opening poem of Brigit Kelly's book *Song*, where a decapitated goat head is singing. The two poems are radically different, but I mention it in part because I can start to see Kelly as Southern gothic, as well, though she lives in Illinois and, I think, is from Oregon. And it makes me wonder if what we're thinking of as Southern gothic doesn't begin to seem something more peculiarly American, or are some of us just more in conversation with a particular tradition, I don't know.

But even as I say all of this—and now I guess I'm veering toward your question for me about a possible New England gothic—I realize that all of the things that you mention having found first in Southern gothic literature, specially about outsiders and how their very being is in contradiction, often violently, with traditions of what's “acceptable” behavior, all of this is something I first discovered in Greek tragedy when I studied Classics as an undergraduate. That was the literature that gradually led me to realize I wasn't alone in feeling somehow at odds with an apparent “norm.” In classical literature, it's not always sexuality that's the problem, but it can be—in Euripides's *The Bacchae*, for example, and of course there's Sophocles's *Oedipus*—more often it's a kind of moral clashing between human instinct and societal expectation, which has become pretty much the context for everything I've written, I think. So all of that is to say that this notion of gothic outsidersness seems to extend beyond this country, even, though America has the fact of slavery rippling everywhere—the enslavement of a single race, as opposed to the differently awful slavery of the classical world, based more on xenophobia more generally.... Someone once described my poems, in a review, as decidedly un-American, more European in sensibility—I'm not sure how to take that, but it might have to do with what I've just said about classical influences.

When it comes to landscape, I think my answer is less interesting, or at least less complicated. Having moved, throughout my childhood, since my father was in the military, I never had a chance to attach to a particular landscape—not until he retired, and I was in high school in Massachusetts. I think military kids either become nomads or they put down pretty much unbudgeable roots as soon as they can. I can't seem to shake the New England coast, the ocean, etc. Plus, I still have family there and visit there each year. But I've now been in Missouri longer than I was ever anywhere, and I think a river and big sky sensibility is somewhere in the poems, even if they themselves appear rarely. Who can say? Ultimately, I think there's a landscape I've built up in my head, where plains meet the sea, the sea sidles around mountains—

and then there's the desert, which gets featured in one of the poems in *Reconnaissance*, thanks I suppose to a brief stint in Arizona a couple years back....

Can we think of form as landscape? There's so much formal range in *Boy with Thorn*, from the form you take from Stevens for "Of the Leaves That Have Fallen," to the seemingly free form of "Little Song," where the end words of each line end of forming a whispered, rather sensual prayer, to the call-and-response form of "Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta," to the prose poem of "No Ararat".... And so many other forms in between. To me, they convey a certain restlessness that is consistent with bodily restlessness and the restlessness of history, of identity, the subjects of your meditations throughout the book. I guess my question is: what do you have to say about form, your relationship to it, anything you'd like to say—a sprawl of a question, I know....

Laurentiis: I would definitely count Tennessee Williams as a Southern Gothic writer. So many of his plays, anyway, were set in the South, even if at times it was an imagined South that, perhaps, could only really exist in his head. A drama like *Suddenly, Last Summer*, for instance, puts it all on the table: set in New Orleans, lush, "exotic," focusing on the conflict between a well-to-do, genteel Southern matriarchal figure and her slightly more naive niece, and there's even the conflict between these two and the ghost of the niece's cousin who haunts the play, at least accusations of his homosexual exploits haunt the play.... I remember seeing the film with Elizabeth Taylor and Katherine Hepburn when I was very little—too little to really understand what was going on—and then it wouldn't be until years later, at Sarah Lawrence, in one of the LGBT courses I took, when I would see it again. I guess that's one of the earliest moments when I began to see the Southern Gothic in a different way—as a means of exploring, as I've said, all these various manners of identity, their intersections, and the violence that sometimes attends those crossings.

And it's also true that I could see Brigit Kelly as a gothic poet. Though to be honest I have this tendency to do this with much of the writing that resonates with me—to want to call it "gothic" in its sensibilities—which likely is more of a commentary on me and my reading practices than necessarily the text itself. But I agree with you that there's something about this genre that seems, at once, both quintessentially "American" (whatever really that means) even as it escapes those national borders. Gothic, at least I've read up on it, is already a borrowing from European, or specifically English, traditions. It's just that abandoned castle of England becomes the decaying plantation of the South; the Count becomes Boo Radley, etc. I guess when I think of "Gothic," writ large, I ultimately think of the kind of quadruple-helix of violence with pleasure, terror with delight; the uncanny; the grotesquerie that is at once nauseating as it is fascinating, compelling. And I suppose it is good literature—regardless of the particular landscape or genre—that brings up all those seeming contradictions and paradoxes to the surface for a reader to consider. That's, anyway, what I'm thinking as you speak about the role of Greek tragedy in your education. And interesting how it is these sort of reified canonical works or figures—Sophocles and Faulkner, for example—who have led us to what I want to say are un-reified notions of the counter-normal, outsidership, the queer. Who would have guessed?

Form as landscape? That's interesting. I think, with exception of "Of the Leaves that Have Fallen," all the forms that appear in the book came about organically, to the extent that we can call any act of writing and subsequent revision as "organic." I mean, I wasn't particularly conscious of the forms a given poem would take until about midway through—when it would already begin to reveal something about itself, its structure or rhythms that would seem to lend itself to a given form. It's very much how you describe it: an act of restlessness, as well as trial-and-error. There were many times I wrote poems thinking "Well, it's repeating here and here in this way, so maybe it might want to work as a villanelle" and, in the revision, I'm led to some new turn of phrase or idea that wasn't available before and that's exciting, but then I would realize the form is, in fact, suffocating now and I would break it apart or change it into something else. That's a little bit about how the title poem got to be how it was. I had no idea it would be sectioned and numbered as it was, since it originally started as a very short, one-stanza poem that kept sprawling over and outward. So I guess my relationship to form is like my relationship to the dark: as an act of stepping into it, almost blindly and, not at least until my eyes adjust, without knowing exactly where I'm going. That's the fun of it, of writing and revision. I'm not sure I would care to do any of this if not for that crucial, if sometimes agonizing, step.

Could we think about, maybe, one of the most basic of poetic "forms" for a moment: text, preceded by title? This is actually something that's for a long time arrested me about your work, and which I've wanted to ask you about: your process of getting to, and choosing titles for your poems. Yours run the gamut: sometimes they've very "straightforward" or, rather, they have obvious connections to the text of the poem, such as the earlier mentioned "The Darker Powers." But other times, maybe most often, they work a bit more mysteriously, obliquely, seemingly disconnected from the text, so that as a reader one of the first "arguments" we have to consider and negotiate in the poem is indeed the one made between the title and text. One example might be another short poem in the book, "Thunder;" another might be the slightly longer, "Capella"—which as I look it up I see is the name of the brightest star in the constellation Auriga. But the washed-up remnants of Catholic school Latin and college Italian in my head also wants me to think it has some relation to our English word "chapel" and also some connection to those round hats we see, for instance, Cardinals wearing. Is that right? Anyway, you could speak about those two poems specifically, or maybe just offer some of your thoughts on your relationship to titles and titling in general...

Phillips: Surprising and not so surprising, to me, that so-called canonical works can be the ways into exploring our own outsidership, queerness, uncanonality—I guess it's why I keep insisting, all these years into teaching, on making sure students are aware of what happened in literature before 1950. I've feared, sometimes, that it makes me seem conservative, directing people to Frost, Hopkins, Wyatt, Dickinson, etc., but when I think of it, just looking at those four, there's a lot about them that makes them outsiders. Euripides, whom I mentioned earlier, is definitely the outsider among the other Greek tragedians.

My sense, by the way, from your poems and from having worked with you for two years, is that we work exactly the same way, when it comes to arriving at form. Ditto, our relationship to the dark. As if there were a difference between the dark and form. And maybe this is a loose way of

trying to answer your question about titles. My titles always come after the poem has been written—and often it can be days, or weeks, before I have a title. As it happens, I spent much of this morning trying to figure out a new title for a poem I finished a month ago—it had a title, but I started feeling it was the wrong one....You are right, I prefer a title that offers the possibility of engagement and surprise, right from the start. A title like "The Walk," if it turns out to be about someone walking, is not only boring to me, but it seem to pass up an opportunity for more work to get done on the page. In that sense, I think of titles as prosodic tools. On the other hand, if a poem is called "Thunder" and it's followed by a handful of lines that seem to be excerpted fragments of some overheard conversation, I think something more provocative occurs -- in what way do these fragments relate to thunder? Is the thunder's dialogue what gets overheard? What would dialogue be, for thunder? Or is thunder the title as a way of conveying a psychological and emotional space—something about liminality, approaching storm (or being in the wake of storm), something about threat? I like that complicatedness, and I hope for a reader who enjoys thinking about those questions. For me, it helps the poem resonate.

But when it comes to how I arrive at the titles, I'm afraid I have nothing sophisticated to say, and maybe a lot more frustrating instead. The titles come to me. Pretty much out of nowhere—or at least not when I'm trying to find them. "Capella," for example—that word just came to me, and I knew it had to be the title of my poem. I then looked it up and found out it was a star, as you mentioned. But for me it has more to do with the phrase "a capella" in music—and yet "capella" by itself has nothing to do with music. But I stuck with it for the title. There's an older poem of mine, called "Sudden Scattering of Leaves, All Gold." That title came out of a dog walk at night, one fall, when a gust of wind blew and many of the leaves of a sapling tree scattered. The title, in those words exactly, came to me, and I ran home to write it down before I'd forget.... The truth is, titles come to me the way poems do—I'm not able to write toward an idea, or toward a subject, any more than I'm able to write toward the idea of a book of poems; if I thought I was writing a book of poems and I knew what it was about, I couldn't write, which I know is contrary to how many poets work.

Perhaps I've found a segue to the next question for you. I've just said what I've said about not being able to write toward a given subject. And I suspect that is usually the case for you, as well? But I notice that there are several poems in *Boy with Thorn*, including the title poem, that are ekphrastic and seem to have actually been occasioned by the art object—paintings by Basquiat, O'Keeffe, David Bailly, for example. Granted, you take the poem elsewhere, by the end, it's not "merely" a recapturing of the visual in terms of language. So, do you work that way—write towards the subject, knowing what it is ahead of time—often? And I wonder about this, too, in terms of a —did you have a sense of the book for quite some time before you actually put it together? These are considerably more practical questions, I know, but I hope of interest....

Laurentiis: When I encountered your pedagogical style—that is, to teach with some awareness of literature pre-1950—I didn't take it at all as conservative, especially in part because you'd present the work without any dogged insistent on *how* we should be reading it. Any one of us could perform, as I did, whatever manner of critical readings upon the text—feminist, queer, racial, prosodic, what have you. I found it refreshing, insofar as it offered an opportunity to turn

our contemporary eyes back on history, only to sometimes discover that many of the ideas, notions or strategies we think of as new aren't necessarily so new after all. We've been speaking a little about being or being made to feel like an outsider, but this sort of reading practice is one of the few ways I can be made to feel a true *part* of something larger, even older, than me.

Maybe, in some way, I'm inching toward a response to your last question for me. Because—and you're right about this—while I don't often don't *want* to write toward any given subject or idea necessarily, I do take pleasure from being in conversation with these aspects (literary or what have you) of history. Beyond just being, if I can be most honest, completely envious of visual art (and, by proxy, visual artists), the ekphrastic poem simply gives me opportunity to continue this conversation. In some ways, I feel as if this question comes full circle to your first one—about sustaining or maintaining certain traditions, adding one's voice among the chorus and seeing how, then, the whole melody may or may not change as result. But, back to the ekphrasis for just a moment, “occasioned” is really the best word for the process. Because it's only after an encounter with the art object that the poem—really, just an idea or inkling of a poem—“occasions” itself inside me, not unlike the situation of those autumn leaves falling around you that you describe, which inspired your title. I understand my ekphrastic poems as the record of the “argument” that took place between me, as viewer, and art object (whether on the museum wall, on the computer screen or, as in the case with “Of the Leaves That Have Fallen” in both a book of lynching photographs and a poem by Wallace Stevens). That's really to say—and this may be why my ekphrastic poems usually, at some point, get away from “mere” description, besides the fact that I find merely describing an art object in a poem to be not only dull but, in some sense, disrespectful, for the art object already exists as itself, why attempt to copy it?—Anyway, that's really to say that the poem is a record of an argument I'm having with myself, and whatever the art object for me conjures or unsettles in me or drags to the surface. Sometimes that's the assault of capital-H History; sometimes it's smaller, more personal memories or experiences that reveal, just at that moment, themselves; sometimes it's entire fictions.

As for the case of the book: no, I really had no direct sense of the book that eventually became *Boy with Thorn* until, well, it was already made. There were several earlier manuscript drafts, quite radically different really—so I did have some sense that I was aiming for *a* book, to write one, but I had no direct idea what it would fully concern. And I quite like that. It returns back to our shared understandings of form and the dark. The surprise and thrill of it all is in the not knowing where it may lead, even if that with can come uncertainty or danger.

Danger, restlessness, thrill, queerness—and I haven't looked over what you had to say about “Capella,” which is useful to me. Useful because it teaches me that, as writers, perhaps our ultimate instinct is to trust ourselves, our impulses. That's at work in your decision to, once “Capella” came to you, to trust and use it as the title, and it's also at work with regard to this new poem that, it seems, your gut later told you wasn't yet properly titled. So often writers, maybe perhaps young writers, are frantic to find “the answers” in books, in MFA programs, even in conversations like this one we're having, and I say this because not very long ago I maneuvered in this way. And yet perhaps it's just a manner of reading as much as we can and then, after reading, listening to ourselves. I think, though, that's probably one of the hardest parts about

being a writer, even being a human: to listen, deeply, to our own minds, hearts, instincts—because what if we hear something we didn't want to know, or have been trying to deny? So often your work mines this territory beautifully, honestly, and *Reconnaissance* is no exception. I even like that choice of title: how it has military connotations, seeming to make obvious the potential risk and destructiveness involved in this work.

My last question for you is not one I can seem to make a proper bridge for, but here it is anyway: given that you write what could be called such personal poems, insofar as they survey that territory I describe earlier, how do you negotiate this with, say, the more "public" news of the world? I'm thinking about something you mentioned earlier, about how you've now lived in St Louis the longest you've lived anywhere, St Louis which only a year ago exploded with regard to Ferguson, the murder of Michael Brown and the subsequent #BlackLivesMatter movement. I'm not going to ask *if* any of that has implications on you or your work because I'm sure, even if subconsciously, it does. It certainly has on me, for how do I escape these threats of erasure? Anyway, I wonder *how* you filter this news, these times we're in, that particular noise, while also listening to yourself—in your poems? A giant question, maybe an impossible one, but anything you'd have to say I'm sure would be enlightening....

Phillips: What you say about writing honestly from our hearts, minds, instincts as a writer, in particular—may be the very bridge we need for getting to your question about Ferguson, the relationship between the personal world of my poems and the public events that are, of course, part of my personal life, too. So many angles from which to approach this subject! You're right, Ferguson and all of the events that have emerged from and/or come to light around it -- these have necessarily affected me; but where, for many, these events seem to have been a revelation, for me they have been a reinforcement of what I've known all my life, not least of all because of having been born pre-Civil Rights, and to a bi-racial (black, white) couple who were sometimes denied the right to travel together, were refused housing, and married in a time when their marriage was illegal in many states. Meanwhile, in my time here in St. Louis, I've been stopped at least three times and asked for proof that I owned the car I was driving -- in each case, I have no doubt that the issue was my being black; and in each case, as soon as I showed a Washington University ID, I received apologies and was told that I was of course not "the type" they were worried about —all kinds of problems, right there....

How any of that has found its way into my poetry is difficult to say, or to say easily. For starters, I do believe that poetry is ultimately not a transcription of experience but a transformation of it—that's at least what it is, for me. I don't expect that I'm going to end up writing poems that speak directly to the events of Ferguson in such a way that Ferguson itself appears in the poem, or racial injustice is specifically addressed—that's not the kind of poet that I am and, going back to what you said about trusting our instincts, I have long ago known that I'm more a poet who tries to get at the psychological and emotional textures of a life without grounding them in specifics of particular events in the news. I've never written a 9/11 poem, in that sense, if what's meant is a poem that actually describes the events of that day and meditates on the meaning/meaninglessness of it all—and yet, I believe that every poem I've written since that day is necessarily filtered through the lens of that event and my experience of it; maybe it comes

across in terms of how I address fragility, or vulnerability, or assumptions we once had about what was and wasn't possible, hard to say.

Getting back to Ferguson, what I notice more isn't how the events there have filtered into my work, but how certain things I've long investigated have turned out to be large points of discussion for the #BlackLivesMatter movement and for people, generally, when addressing race right now. Specifically, from the start I've been concerned with the body—how we conduct it, vs. how we're told we should conduct it; and once we get into being told how to conduct it, that raises the other issue I've long been concerned with, namely power, who gets to hold it, what the responsibilities are of holding it, who doesn't get to hold it, how —if at all—can power be handled with something like fluidity, within an intimate relationship, but also within the relationship between the personal and the public spheres, one's own body and—again—the society that thinks to dictate how that body should be handled. Granted, when I've spoken of the body, it's largely been in the sexual arena, and that's the same with power. But I feel very much in conversation, at the same time, with what's being said lately about the black body, about police as the manifestation of societally endorsed power, and about the tensions that result when the body, the black body in particular, resists the restraints being imposed by those in power. Somewhere in all of this, there's a related fear of otherness, be it in terms of color, as here, or by extension in terms of sex, gender—we're back to queerness, I suppose. I like to think that what I'm writing resonates, at the psychological and emotional level, with what has been happening in terms of Ferguson and the conversations around it. I think the most honest thing I can do, and still be true to the only poet I can ultimately be, is to record my version of how it feels to be alive right now, in this climate. There are other versions, and we need all of them, in order to see and feel clearly, accurately, the times we live in, and to be able to ask questions accordingly. Certainly I'm writing the only poems I can write. So, to get back to the original question, I don't feel that I'm filtering the news of Ferguson, while also listening to myself in poems—I think it all gets mixed together, who I am has been filtered through the events of Ferguson, largely in ways that I'm sure I'm not aware of; Ferguson becomes yet another lens of experience through which I can't help but see the world around me differently. And, interestingly, to me, those poems that I wrote before Ferguson happened now read differently to me, nuanced as they now are by events that they weren't originally intended to speak to.

Laurentiis: You're right. The question of Ferguson can be approached via so many angles and avenues, it's that "pregnant" of a—what? Image? Symbol? Event? As you respond, I'm recalling the opening lines of one other poem in *Reconnaissance* that suppose "what if suffering is in fact for nothing— / no particular wisdom after, blooming flower-like, / blood in the water?" It's a scary proposition, at least a bit unnerving. A reversal of the time-worn (Greek? Christian? Egyptian?) notion that, eventually, through tribulation will come some new, better, earned knowledge. You could apply these lines to almost any situation—major or local—but now I'm thinking about what you've said about how it all—Ferguson, the policing and killing of black bodies, the reinforcement, as opposed to new revelation, of these notions of power—about how it all gets mixed up in you, probably in no discernible or conscious way, but in such a way that these three-and-a-half lines, at least for me, can't be totally divorced from the situation in Ferguson and Baltimore and America in general. And as I said, it's scary. What *if* all this suffering—

and I hear I specifically mean that stricken upon the black body—is for nothing, leads to nothing, no salvation or redemption in the end? What then?

I think I share a lot of your feelings regarding how one's poems come about in times like these, which even as I say that I recognize are not so quite unlike times before our own except that maybe we're more easily bombarded with viral images of these tragedies, recreating these deaths in some sense. Anyway, I don't think I ever set to write a poem that is very directly related to certain events, though I would also be lying if I said I didn't have a voice in my head insisting that, somehow, a part of my duty is to regard those events in some way. It may be like how I've said form, in general, slowly comes to take hold of a particular poem—it's not a deliberate decision from the onset, but eventually may reveal itself. Ultimately, I agree with you: I recognize that simply *being*—and that runs the gamut of emotions from joy to frustration to sadness to pride—I recognize simply *being* in this world, writing as a gay, black poet, is in some sense still revolutionary in itself. And I recognize that to write down what it feels like for that particular subjectivity to live in this world is all I can do, if I'm to be, as you say, honest.

But it's difficult to say how long before those images, those breaking news reports and court cases and exonerations and what have you—difficult to say how long before they take a toll on me. And the toll could be in any way: calcification, erosion of the spirit, one's sense of hope . . . That's why I guess I was reminded of those lines from earlier. It's probably why I come to poetry, at all: not always to be comforted, but to be sometimes discomfited since, in any either case, the sensation is yet a realization that I'm still alive, that I *am* matter. Maybe that's what it means to be a part of these communities and traditions, like the one you raised at the very beginning of our conversation. Maybe it's means just to be alive, and writing.

Phillips: I agree with you, it seems that it can be enough, just to be writing, if we are writing responsibly, which is to say not divorced from what's happening, in terms of suffering, around us. What parts we choose to speak to directly isn't always a choice, I think. The fear surrounding the events at Ferguson and elsewhere, the sense of vulnerability, the apparent meaninglessness of the black body, the particular conundrum I feel in being stranded as a body—half black, half—in a kind of no-man's-land where it's difficult to gauge at any moment the difference between acceptance and tolerance, the degree to which acceptance comes only because my body doesn't pose, to some, as black a threat as another's: it's impossible for me to avoid feeling all of this, incorporating it into my sensibility, not just as a poet, but as a human being. The margins that I write from are maybe more recognizably grounded in sexual queerness than in race. But there is no racelessness in this world. I hope that I speak to any person whose outsidership keeps leaving them somehow grappling. I hope my poems are a kind of grappling that they can relate to, a way of showing that we're together in this. Your poems do the same, I believe.

Laurentiis: Yes, to write *responsibly*, to remain connected... I'm reminded of Baldwin, again, who authored one of my favorite quotes related to this: "I want to be an honest man and a good writer." There's the work.