

Event title: Room 222 and the Lineage of Confessional Poetry

Event Description: Generations of poets have taught and learned in Room 222 of 236 Bay State Road, at Boston University, from Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath to Robert Pinsky, Derek Walcott, Rosanna Warren, Louise Gluck, Carl Phillips, and Erin Belieu. Our panel of poets and writers, who are graduates of the BU Creative Writing Program (from the same class of 2000), will discuss the role of imagination, authenticity, and responsibility, while examining the craft and legacy of confessional poetry.

Event Category: Poetry Craft & Criticism

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Opening Remarks

Thank you for joining us for today's panel, **Room 222 and the Lineage of Confessional Poetry**. There are print-outs of our talk available here at the front, for those who may need one.

Let's meet our panelists:

Jacob Strautmann is the Department Manager of Economics at Boston University where he also teaches Playwriting. He was a recipient of the Massachusetts Artist Fellowship in Poetry. His first collection of poems, The Land of Dead is Open for Business has just been published this week by Four Way Books.

Kirun Kapur is the winner of the Arts & Letters Rumi Prize and the Antivenom Award for her first book, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist*. Her second book, *Women in the Waiting Room*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series. She is poetry editor at *The Drum* and teaches at Amherst College.

Rachel DeWoskin is the author of 5 novels: *Banshee*, *Someday We Will Fly*, *Blind*, *Big Girl Small*, *Repeat After Me*, and a memoir: *Foreign Babes in Beijing*. Her poetry collection, *Two Menus*, will be published this month from UChicago Press. She has been featured in *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, & *Ploughshares*, and is a professor at University of Chicago.

Mukoma Wa Ngugi, an Associate Professor of English at Cornell University is the author of *Mrs. Shaw*, *Black Star Nairobi*, *Nairobi Heat*, *Logotherapy* and *The Rise of the African Novel*. He is the co-founder of the Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Writing and the Global South Project at Cornell.

And I'm your moderator and organizer for today: My name is **Frederick Speers**. My first book of poems *So Far Afield* was published in 2018, and it was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. I live with my husband and our two dogs in Denver, Colorado.

Ok. For today: let's close our eyes for a moment, and imagine a room on the second floor of a brownstone at Boston University, on Bay State Road. Room 222. It's a snug room that fits about 14 old-fashioned wooden desks, arranged in a simple closed curve. On one side, built-in bookshelves filled with dusty journals and books. On the other side, a bay-window view of the Charles River.

When interviewed about Room 222, Robert Pinsky said: "Of all of the classrooms I've taught in — Harvard, Berkeley, University of Chicago, Stanford — this is my favorite" "The legend of Lowell teaching Plath, Sexton, and Starbuck is only part of it. I like the echoes. But I now have my own memories of all the students I've taught in this room over 16 years. And I like knowing that my colleagues [Louise Glück](#), [Leslie Epstein](#), [Ha Jin](#), [Rosanna Warren](#) are using this room, too. I like knowing it's ours."

Today's panel brings together a group of poets and writers who graduated from Boston University's Creative Writing program, who all sat together in Room 222 for workshops and lectures, exactly 20 years ago. We're honored to be with you all today, to discuss questions in the craft of lyric poetry, to understand whether they've changed (or not) over the years, questions like:

- What does it mean to be "confessional"? Is the confessional mode simply another mask that's been passed down through time, or does it operate differently today?
- How do we draw and redraw the lines between authenticity and art? Personality and poetry? Why are those lines important?
- And, why do some generalize and criticize contemporary poetry as "narcissistic" or self-absorbed? Is there truth to that critique? What's our answer?

We'll begin with 1-minute opening remarks from each of the panelists. And then each panelist will dive back into each of their talks for about 7 minutes or so. And then we'll conclude our time together with Q&A and discussion. So, let's get started. Jake, you're up first.

Participant Opening Remarks

[Summary statements that each panelist will open the panel with, and then, one by one, discuss in more detail after the opening remarks; no more than 1 paragraph/30 seconds to 1 min.]

Opening statement from Jacob Strautmann:

Confessionalism was born from specific American cultural trends of the 1950s and as a response to the Great Modernists (i.e., what's left for poetry to do now?) Confessionalism can also be viewed as a mode that developed in sharing work and ideas between students and professors. In this short introduction to the term, Robert Lowell's shift in style and subject matter is brought into focus. Besides bringing Confessionalism into the mainstream, he was a teacher of the panelists' teachers at Boston University. The chain of these teachers are laid out in bold strokes to outline the panel's relationship to the Great Dead and how Confessionalism took root at Boston University and elsewhere.

Opening statement from Rachel DeWoskin: What does it mean to call poetry (by Sylvia Plath, for example, or Anne Sexton) "confessional"? To what extent has "confessional" become a diminutive, an oversimplification? If both the content and the form are subversive, it's likely that the studied, intentional intimacy of the poems by these and other poets who have been called "confessional" actually forces us to look directly at (to read and empathize with) subject matter and subjects too wide and politically charged to be considered personal confession. In a sense, confession ropes readers in, implicating us and requiring that we consider ourselves among the subjects and the objects of poems such as "Morning Song" and "You, Doctor Martin".

Opening statement from Kirun Kapur: Building on the previous discussions of Lowell, Plath and Sexton, I'd like to investigate what has happened to confessional poetry in the generations between its originators and our own time. Using the work of Louise Glück as an exemplar, we can see that more recent iterations of "confessional" poetry take the self and its obfuscations into new territory—destabilizing the very idea of a unified self and perfecting a stance that appears private/inward facing, but is, in fact, looking outward, casting a critical eye on the world.

Opening statement from Mukoma wa Ngugi: What does African confessional poetry look like? How do writers like Dumbudzo Marechera and Arthur Nortje use the confessional poem for deeply political work? Or feminist writers like Micere Mugo and Ama Ata Aidoo use the form to explore African feminism? How does the debate between political art and art for art's sake play out in African poetry?

Outlines of Each Talk from Each of the Panelists

Outline of Jacob Stratumann's Talk:

Title: The Great Dead

1. Introduction to the Character
 - a. Derek Walcott on Robert Lowell: "one of the great dead"
 - b. Kathleen Spivak on Robert Lowell
2. Publication of Life Studies
 - a. M.L. Rosenthal on Life Studies
 - b. Comparison with earlier work
3. Life Studies in Context
 - a. 1950s Cultural Trends
 - b. Poets responding to the Great Modernists
4. Lowell's Contemporaries
 - a. Two letters to William Carlos Williams
 - b. Frank Bidart
5. Conclusion
 - a. Bidart on Lowell's Confessionalism: "illusion of accuracy"
 - b. Lowell on Death/Fame

Outline of Rachel DeWoskin's Talk:

Title: We Are Magic Talking to Itself

Intro:

- I. Frank Bidart argues:
 - a. "Art, not candor, makes a poem."
 - b. "Lowell's seeming candor was always intensely artful,"
 - c. "Lowell (also a 222 grad) must be read for his poetic genius, not his capacity to shock."
- II. Can the same argument hold for Sexton (a 222 grad) and Plath's (a 222 grad) poetry?
 - a. There is a brilliant artifice to what's "confessional" about each poet's poems.
 - i. The confessing poetic voice allows for an intimate address to a "you" at once personal and utterly public– the poet's therapist or her newborn baby, for example, and also all of her readers.
 - ii. This permits the translation of material potentially too taboo to be discussed candidly or in any way less lyrical, less artful: sex, suicide, madness, and motherhood.

Sexton and Plath:

- I. Sexton and Plath both often use a poetic or fictional “I” to address a “you” who is seemingly individual but also a strange and complex crowd of all of us.
- II. In the two poems “You Doctor Martin,” (Sexton) and “Morning Song” (Plath) – the poets reach out to a (fictional/real) doctor and a (fictional/real) baby in their first lines, “You, Doctor Martin, walk from breakfast to madness,” and “Love Set You Going Like a Fat Gold Watch.”
- III. What does it mean to confess in verse to an individual fictional listener, while writing to a universe of real ones?

The Poems:

You Doctor Martin

You, Doctor Martin, walk
from breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
or the laughing bee on a stalk

of death. We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the doors and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
and we move to gravy in our smock
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates
scratch and whine like chalk

in school. There are no knives
for cutting your throat. I make
moccasins all morning. At first my hands
kept empty, unraveled for the lives
they used to work. Now I learn to take
them back, each angry finger that demands
I mend what another will break

tomorrow. Of course, I love you;
you lean above the plastic sky,
god of our block, prince of all the foxes.
The breaking crowns are new
that Jack wore.
Your third eye
moves among us and lights the separate boxes
where we sleep or cry.

What large children we are
here. All over I grow most tall
in the best ward. Your business is people,
you call at the madhouse, an oracular
eye in our nest. Out in the hall
the intercom pages you. You twist in the pull
of the foxy children who fall

like floods of life in frost.
And we are magic talking to itself,
noisy and alone. I am queen of all my sins
forgotten. Am I still lost?
Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf.

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

The Confessional "You" and its foil, the "I":

- I. The "you" addressed in each of these poems is not only an individual stand-in for someone in whom each poet is ostensibly confiding, but also every single "you" who reads the poem.

- a. Those are our clear vowels rising like balloons as we read Morning Song aloud, our business being people, our twisting in the pull, our being paged as Doctor Martin is paged, by the patients and the poets.
- b. This collective you implicates and invites all of us, strangely and essentially, including each poet herself, so that she is both the I and the you, ultimately all powerful.
 - i. It is this trick of lyrical first and second pronoun magic that allows Sexton and Plath to align their own lives.
 - 1. The particular difficulties of being women and poets and mothers in the era in which they lived—
 - 2. The shared contradictions and complexities that are the substance of most human lives and minds.
- II. These poems are not autobiography, not purely “confessional,” because as our professor Derek Walcott once said of Auden’s work, “the I is not more important than the subject.”
 - a. He also called autobiography “a burden on the reader.”
- III. As the addressees of poems like Sexton’s “You Doctor Martin,” and Plath’s “Morning Song,” we are both confided in and made vulnerable.
 - a. This mimics the way in which the poets are simultaneously confessing and obfuscating with their poetic uses of “I.”

The Confusion of Confession for Biographical Truth:

- I. The real Dr. Martin, Sexton’s therapist, Dr. Martin Orne, divided cleanly in their therapy sessions between Sexton as a poet and Sexton as a person.
- II. He favored “the real Anne Sexton,” considered her work distinct from her person, often describing it as what she did, in opposition to what or who she was.
- III. She considered her poetry work they were doing collaboratively, part of her identity, but he argued against that notion, and also against any fusion of her poetic and real selves.
- IV. To call Plath and Sexton’s poetry merely confessional is to suggest a dangerous oversimplification.
 - a. Both the content and the form are subversive
 - b. It is precisely the studied, intentional intimacy of the poems that forces us to look directly at – to read and empathize with their subject matter and subjects, and to consider ourselves among both the subjects and objects of the poems.
 - i. In “You, Doctor Martin,” when Sexton writes “There are no knives for cutting your throat,” she conflates “I” and “You”
 - ii. She, the poet, is the one in the asylum, and until that line, Dr. Martin has been the “you,” but now we are explicitly made “you” as well.
 - 1. Our own throats suddenly protected by the absence of knives.
 - iii. When Dr. Martin’s “third eye” moves among us, we shift uncomfortably into “us,” watched by the you of the poem instead of inhabiting its “you.”
 - 1. Thus we are removed in that moment from both our status as the addressee, and, as a result, our tenancy in the land of the unscathed and reliably sane. I
 - 2. We are implicated, connected to Sexton more closely than we could be by any means other than the magic of a certain sort of

poem, one that tries to align the multiple faces of its poet by way of the roles it casts: You, I, We, and Us.

- iv. Sexton is confessing not exclusively what sets her apart from either Doctor Martin or her reader, but what – more disturbingly and profoundly – connects us.
- V. When Plath sets us going with her opening line, “Love Set you Going like a Fat Gold Watch,” she sets the poem in motion, erasing instantly the boundary between us and her newborn, whose bald cry takes its place among the elements.
 - a. Who are we?
 - b. Who is the baby at the center of the poem’s “you,” and who is Plath?
 - c. What is it she’s confessing: “I’m no more your mother//Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow//Effacement at the wind’s hand.”
 - d. It’s both “confessional” and also “artful,” a tricky craft to render motherhood kaleidoscopically, full of joy and loss.
 - i. And the loss here is naturally tied to identity, which for both poets and poems, is a central problem.
 - ii. “I’m no more your mother,” is both true and untrue – true.
 - 1. Plath is not our mother, not the mother of the you reading the poem. But she is the mother of the baby she’s ostensibly addressing, who I’m guessing can’t yet read.
 - a. And in that truth/untruth is the equivocation that’s part of human contradiction.
 - iii. This is an artful way of shooting through with doubt one’s own identity, or, more aptly, resisting the possibility of narrowing oneself to a single version of that identity, whether it’s as a mother, a poet, a woman, wife, daughter, or lover.
- VI. It is precisely the confessional shape and tone of Plath and Sexton’s poems that allow the poets to be multiple versions of themselves, with more ease and elasticity than their “real” lives or the people who inhabited those lives, allowed them.

Conclusion:

- I. Plath’s baby’s nakedness in the poem, which I think suggests Plath’s own vulnerability at what she’s ostensibly confessing, reflects the magic of reaching out across the lines to an audience of you, and shadows our safety.
- II. And of course Sexton herself is now, for all the yous who read her, “the moving dead,” still talking, still writing out to us.
 - a. As she puts it in the final line of her poem “The Double Image,” I made you to find me.”
 - b. And as for what she and Plath have asked and said of themselves and us, I’ll invoke Derek Walcott again, the day he simultaneously liberated and dared us in class. He said, “poets can’t help but be courageous.”

Outline of Kirun Kapur's Talk:

Title: Glück and the Army of the Self

- I. A new vision of the Self (Discussion of *The Wild Iris*)
 - A. The self as theater, actor and chorus. The book becomes a polyphony of voices, rather like a chorus of characters on a stage. The self is playing the role of the self, entering a broader, wider song by way of this fiction.
 - B. Glück both creates/brings the self into being and undercuts the very idea that there is a whole and single self. Glück's voices question the authority and coherence of the created self.
- II. But to what end does the "I" fracture, multiply and fictionalize itself? The theater of confession becomes the arena of social critique. (Discussion of *Witchgrass*)
 - A. The strong I of the poem allows for the creation of an external "You," representing the social and cosmic order.
 - B. The poem and the "I" seem inward looking, but that posture is a misdirection, which allows for a critique of external structures.

In Glück's work the nature of the self is in question, the order of the universe is being questioned, but the voice—self-consciously artificial, multiple and fragmentary is still powerful, as it imagines and constructs not just one, but an army of it's own magical "I"s.

Outline of Mukoma wa Ngugi's Talk:

Title: African Confessional Poets and Radical Liberation Politics

[Outline not available at time of printing.]

Moderator Questions

Now that we've heard from each of the panelists, we have time for Q&A, which I'll kick off with a couple questions, and then we'll open it up to the room.

First question: Does anyone here on the panel consider themselves a “confessional” poet or writer? Why or why not? [...Discussion from panelists...]

Second question: This is a bit more complicated, so here's some context:

Carl Phillips notes in his essay, “The Politics of Mere Being,” that it's entirely possible to be considered political not for what one writes or does in life, but simply for who or what one is.

Likewise, there seems to be a “*Confession of Mere Being*,” for minority poets: That no matter what we're writing, even if it's a grocery list, because of who we are or who we love, our writing can always be considered a kind of confessional because it's perceived as the “other”.

So here's my multi-pronged question: is the confessional poem merely a playground for the privileged, which can be either engaged with, when it's useful, or shown disdain as needed? For those who come from marginalized spaces, the notion of a “confession” can be akin to “coming out”, or speaking truth to power, even when the oppressive power is the artist's real-world self? As **Frank Bidart**, who is famous for his persona poems, writes in his astonishing 2013 poem, “Queer”: “*Lie to yourself about this and you will forever lie about everything.*” How do marginalized voices work differently within the confessional mode? Or, put differently, can they ever work outside it? [...Discussion from panelists...]

Now, let's open things up to the audience.

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