

From Vichy, France, I'm Suzette Grillot, the Dean of the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Welcome to World Views at CIS. On today's program, we'll speak to two poets, Major Jackson...

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And Ladan Osman...

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The two authors served as jury members for the 2017 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, which is awarded each year by World Literature Today.

First, Major Jackson. He serves as the Richard Dennis Green and Gold professor at the University of Vermont and the poetry editor at the Harvard Review. He's the author of four poetry collections: *Roll Deep*, *Holding Company*, *Hoops*, and *Leaving Saturn*, for which he won numerous poetry prizes and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. His poetry, which has been described as "unashamedly lyrical... Layered with illusion and homage," uses Jackson's own experiences as a starting point for identifying and exploring universal experiences.

Major Jackson, welcome to World Views.

Thank you. Happy to be here.

It's great to have you here, and I love to talk about poetry. I'm not a poet, I love poetry, but I've read that your poems tend to be a bit autobiographical. And yet when you think about somebody writing an autobiography, you don't necessarily think about it being done with poetry. Is that fair? How would you characterize your work?

Interestingly enough, I think a good deal of particularly American poetry is autobiographical. There was a huge movement in the late 1950s, 1960s to turn the aesthetic gaze inward rather than outward. And it was a radical shift in American poetry at the time, because what we could finally do is look at, in serious ways, what were some of the issues that impact our lives and explore them through the lens of language that is artful. Some people have gone so far as to call it therapy poetry, or a poetry of sociology. I tend to think of that work alongside the rigorous spirit of experimentation in which poetry is not about the self, but about language or about politics. I see particularly in my own work, my aim is to bear witness to my life, but also bear witness to some of the issues that impact all of our communities. So in that sense, the autobiography is the springboard to larger issues.

So I'm gonna follow up on that, the word you use about experimentation in just a second, but I'd like to know about the language and the language we use and the connections that you can make. Can you kind of elaborate on that a little bit in terms of specific words or specific constructs or syntax, or what is it about the language itself of what you're including in a poem that leadsto that sort of connection?

A good deal of my poetry is informed by the language that I hear in the streets, in the barber shop, on the bus, standing in line, getting coffee at Starbucks, standing in a line at Best Buy or whatever. And that is a language that is vibrant. And to some extent, language can also be informed by region, and there are certain idioms, certain phrases that communities use. So I try to be very specific. I try to make that an essential part of my poetry rather than what we are used to understanding poetry as, which is Poetry, capital P, that it must sound lyrical, that it must sound as if it's angelic. And this goes back actually to a poet in Britain. Two poets, actually -- Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and William Wordsworth, who believed that poetry should be written in the language of the people and the everyday. So I turn to music, I turn to popular music to inform. I turn to TV shows. One thing that Shakespeare didn't have was a cellphone. Why shouldn't that language around technology find its way in our work? So that's kind of what I mean.

In fact, I was gonna ask you about the music because your work's been described as being melodic, that it uses beats and rhythms of jazz and strokes from hip hop and rap. So I would imagine that this is what you're getting at is, is you're reflecting broader cultural things that you're observing, that you're hearing, maybe reflecting all of the senses through your poems. But I'm curious because I'm an internationalist and I like to think of poetry as something that kind of transcends place and space and borders in some ways, that-- You know, everybody reads poetry. There's poetry in every language, in every culture. There are favorite poets, and there are people that you refer to in your growing up stages of the poems that you read. To me, poetry's almost been, I guess something that's kind of universal, not necessarily the specifics, but the things that connect us, the broader issues of human relationships and intimacy and those sorts of things. I don't know. Does that make sense? Is this a universal thing?

Of course, and even if we draw on, let's say a language that is purely local, if it's the poetry, for example of C. D. Wright, the late C. D. Wright, who was from the Ozark part of Arkansas, or an Appalachian poetry, or even an international poet like Czesław Miłosz who, for example, in the poem "Like Song on the End of the Word,"-- Last two lines translated is "no other end of the world will there be." "No other end of the world will there be." That's the kind of Polish translated into English. And even that syntax and that phrase has embedded within it a certain kind of history and a certain kind of experience. So I think language can be a medium by which that is conveyed. Even if it's very local. It's not at the expense of more global human concerns.

So let's talk about that word "experimentation." As you refer to it earlier, you've been quoted as saying before about your poem-- "Each poem is an act of experimenting and discovering." Can you tell us a little bit more about what you mean by that? What are you experimenting with exactly?

Sure. If I'm writing, for example-- If the trigger for a poem is the mountain outside my window, it's a trigger. Where it goes from there, I don't know. And that's what makes the poem an act of discovering, or writing as an act of discovery. Some people sit down, they know what they're going to write about, they're in love, and they want their beloved to know, and that's all well and fine as a certain kind of-- the poem serves a particular purpose. But because I'm a deeply reflective poet, I sit down at my desk with the great joy of discovering who I am. And that kind of reflection -- the page becomes a record of that as the poem unfolds. I realized, for example, that I am adamant about the fact that we need to take care of each other. Now, if you told me to write a poem in which I need it to say that or that was its theme, I would find it quite difficult. But coming up with the imagery, coming up with utterances, is a certain kind of journey and work that leads me to certain places that I didn't know I had the capacity to go there, and that's what I find exciting about writing.

Well, I'm excited listening to you talk about it because in my mind, just imagining the creativity or just what must be going on in your reflective experience to create something that was triggered. And I'm curious what triggers maybe you're talking about, but that was triggered, but that you literally just let it flow and you don't know where it's going. And one of the other quotes that -- I love your quotes by the way -- is that you say, you "let each poem teach me about what poetry can do." And so I'm hearing you talk, and that's what I'm hearing you say more or less, is that it's kind of coming out and that of course seems so foreign to me. I'm not a poet, as I said.

Well, I believe that process is not-- poets don't have a monopoly on a practice. And I just use that word and I know it's common parlance right now, but the more we inhabit-- Let's just substitute poetry for fishing. And if I'm going out on my boat, there's something about the experience of going out, let's say once a week, not daily. I try to write daily, but let's just say once a week. Something about that experience, I'm deepening my relationship to the act of fishing. I'm learning about depth. I'm learning about the time of day to fish. I'm learning about the particular kinds of lures and hooks, and it becomes almost spiritual. Many people, hopefully, people will find that particular activity that is more than just that activity, that they have a profound, deep connection to the world around them because of it. I used to play basketball, and I used to play basketball until nightfall, and it got to a point where even without the street light, I knew where that hoop was and I can shoot in that direction because I understood distance and understood body movement that's gonna get that ball in there. And poetry is like that. For me, sometimes it is shooting basketball at night when there's no light. Sometimes it's like fishing. We work to find analogs and how one thing is like another because to do that is to find the weave that connects the world around us. We all know that the world is a big mystery. Somethings are givens; family, love, heartbreak -- that's gonna happen in a life. But most of it is a mystery and writing is a way for me to, as Robert Frost, said, to some extent, to give shape to the chaos.

Robert Frost had an impact on your life. I can tell.

You heard that somewhere, didn't you? Probably mentioned it in multiple interviews.

I think you've mentioned at some place or another. Yeah, it seems to be obvious. You also wrote a piece-- you have a title from 2006 called *Hoops*? So... Yeah, about your basketball and listening to you talk about making... You didn't use the word, but I was picturing calculations in your mind as you're measuring. You said you measure how far you do this all the time and you don't even realize that we're doing it. I think I see you doing is that you're tapping into that in this artistic way where the rest of us kind of just... Pass over it.

I take that as high praise. As you're talking I was thinking about, we're in a period of technology and great innovations and someone out there is gonna realize that -- if they haven't already -- when we teach robots to make those kinds of calculations, make those kinds of associations. I still believe, by the way that humans, in terms of our capacity to imagine and think have a monopoly on that. But I think artificial intelligence, one of the great leaps is going to be able to have machines make those kinds of multiple associations and metaphors. It invites, particularly with children, it invites complex thinking, and it's almost like you teach them to grow and think when you teach them that one thing is like another. I don't know about you, but when I took my preparation for the SAT, had all those analogies, right?

That's bringing back a little bit of... In fact, at a bit of a... It also brings that kind of a Sesame Street reminder too. The one thing, what thing is not like this. It really does reflect on how we are encouraging that.

That was solid education.

It was back in the day.

Basics.

Alright. Well Major, thank you so much for being here today and sharing your work with us and your story. Thank you.

You've been listening to my conversation with Major Jackson. His most recent poetry collection, *Roll Deep*, is the winner of the 2016 Vermont Book Award and was also a finalist for the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literature and Poetry. This summer Jackson will appear at the UK's Ledbury Poetry Festival. He will also serve as an instructor at the Paris American Academy summer creative writing workshop.

For more information about Major Jackson or to leave a comment or question about this conversation, you can visit our website at cisworldviews.com.

Next, my colleague, Rebecca Cruise, speaks with Ladan Osman. Osman, who graduated with a BA from Otterbein University and an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin's Michener Center for Writers, also served as a 2017 Neustadt Prize juror. Osman's first full length collection of poetry, *The Kitchen-Dweller's Testimony*, won the Sillerman First Book Prize and her chapbook *Ordinary Heaven* was selected for inclusion in the box set *Seven New Generation African Poets*. The daughter of Somali immigrants, Osman grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and uses her work to explore the contours and possibilities of language, translation, and identity.

Ladan Osman, welcome to World Views.

Thank you.

Well, you have a wonderfully interesting story and I thought maybe we would start there. You are from Somalia and immigrated to the United States to Ohio. There are a lot of Somali immigrants in Ohio, in the Michigan area. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience and what that has meant for your writing, which is the career that you are engaged in now?

Well, I grew up largely in the US and in Columbus, Ohio, and so it is just the experience that I am in, right? I'm completely submerged in it. And so sometimes it's hard to tell which tethers go where or what that experience has informed, but it's a relationship, a fracture sometimes, to the self, to identity, to where home actually is. But I think for me, especially because writing is available to me, it has just encouraged a lot of curiosity and questions and a resistance to things like nationalism or a very strong belief in borders, whether that psychological, emotional, state-wise, actual-- just really thinking about who we are as humans and where it is that we are individually and specifically rooted, and then how that's in conversation with a larger responsibility to each other.

You use an interesting phrase there, belief in borders, and maybe you could expand on that. You gave examples of all sorts of different borders-- belief in them in the sense that they exist or that there are boundaries? What do you mean by that?

I definitely am somewhat, as a pretty private person. I love boundaries, and I really believe in the inner sanctuary, but I'm not as convinced by certain politics that try to tell us that we're separate from each other or that it's deeply important to be totally invested in worldly things. This is my name, and this is what my name means. This is the sign of my body. This is what my history signifies, and this is why I should treat other people this certain way, or this is who it is that I have to incline to. This is the type of person that I need to reject. So much of that is a bit loosey goosey for my taste, and I just have always had a struggle believing in it. And then it doesn't hold up logically, doesn't hold up philosophically. And you can see there's so much tension in the world that it obviously doesn't hold up emotionally for people, but it's hard to navigate because at the same time, it matters how we're embodied in who we are and to have a sense of tribe and to have a sense of nation in many ways. It's a nice thing. And maybe there's a safe and careful way to celebrate that while still being responsible globally or universally. But it just seemed to me that a fair amount of problems come, and they start at the individual level, of once you start to make compartments in yourself or divisions in yourself, and then label what they mean or what that means for your actions. And there's not space for investigation for something to surprise you or change your mind. That seems dangerous. Even for the self. It just seems like a very small life, the putting of people in boxes and yourself, and kind of categories of difference, 'cause you put yourself, you put yourself in a box first, you put your own mind in a restriction, and I don't know what's more violent than that. And it seems that that violence makes it easier to do different kinds of violence, conceptual or otherwise to other people, because you've already damaged yourself. But it's almost irresistible. How do we get around it? I don't really know. That's why I keep turning to these different texts, like some of these ancient texts or these writings about quantum physics, because it's hard. We don't have the language sometimes for it. We're just trying to be okay and be humans and exercise love, and that's so hard to do.

Absolutely. But how wonderful that you're exploring these ideas and quantum physics, my goodness. There are grand ideas that we can think about and pull in new ways which leads to your writing. I'm assuming one way that you are exploring some of these issues. Did you always know that you wanted to write, or is there a moment that it kind of became a passion or a way of expression?

I always liked stories and reading, and I definitely remember learning English and learning to read, that those were intertwined, but were distinct things, and they had their own frustrations. And that was complicated by being a very shy child. If I didn't have to absolutely have to speak, I would try to avoid it. And those things were all in a strange conversation with each other, because when you're in school, you have to show evidence of knowledge, you have to recite, you have to perform knowledge. And I think the retreat for me was always to writing, and I wanted to learn how to do these things in order to write. I just thought, this is the most magical thing ever, to look. It was like when I was in the school library and I would see shelves of Ann M. Martin books, The Babysitters' Club-- Because you don't have a sense of a thing as a child, but you see just physically how something is taking up space and that somebody is doing something and believes in themselves enough or believes in a story enough. And I thought that was amazing, and I was like, well, I would love to be able to write anything down to really be able to write properly and entertain myself in that way. And so there was a knowing from a young age, but I couldn't really put things to practice

until at some point, probably even after grad school, even though I went to undergrad and grad school for writing. And some of those are very competitive programs. I didn't have very much confidence and I didn't really know what I was doing, and it took turning to craft later on and really thinking, well, there is some way that I can improve. There's some exercise that I can do with my mind that doesn't really have anything to do with even other people. It's just what is my relationship to language and how can I teach myself something that language? So in some ways, really coming into my writing self in the last probably six years, seven years, it was like a return to the very beginning of what it is that brought me to the language and reading and writing at all.

So you've done a lot of exploration, you deal with a lot of very interesting issues, race and other issues. Do you consider yourself an activist? Is this a form of activism, or is this simply a form of expression and storytelling?

I think that they can be both things. I don't think that we can separate it so easily. And I also think that some of us, the way that we're embodied, it's an activated life. You don't have a choice except to walk with your politics anyway. And I don't think that I should shy away from-- if there's some responsibilities. While I hesitate to call myself an activist only for the reason of the work that that takes, the activity that that takes, I don't know that I fulfill that criteria. I don't exclude social justice from my work. And some of that is overtly political conversation, but it's also really interested in practicing tenderness, practicing self-compassion, and letting that do something outside of yourself, not only in your language, but also in your politics. And I think because my work can be, in some ways, really small and hyper cinematic, even if there are larger questions about identity or state structures or whatever at play, I really believe if you can make someone take more time looking at the world around them or consider the sky or consider the atmosphere of a poem, it makes it really hard to be insensitive to yourself or to other people. And so that's probably one of the primary ways that I'm looking at what I'm responsible for as a writer. Can I open something in someone else? Did I open something in myself?

One of the words that's been used to describe your work, and one of the themes perhaps that you look at is, "magic" and "mystical." And I wonder if you could maybe explain that a little bit.

I'm really interested in magic because I feel surprised by, every day almost, of the way-- Because one of my interests and other practices is photography. And I've been really informed by photography and by film as well as writing. What the light does and how it shifts and what it executes is really deep and mystical magic for me. Almost all my poems have water in them. I think a lot about water. How strange that water exists, and it's so critical and it's see through, and it's so determined and it bores through things and it goes underground, it needs to... And it goes around things. And it forms these really impressive landscapes that we don't automatically attribute to water. So there are things that are just on the basic, basic fundamental level, but then also the vastness of people and all the possibilities between people-- that people ask questions and they touch each other in ways that are frankly shocking to me sometimes, but in a really positive way. And so I try to bring -- let that all into my own life and try to leave at least some of it on the page. Yeah. I don't know. I'm interested in the mystical and in things that are hard to describe and are ambiguous to some degree and that we don't really have vocabulary for. So I guess that would all fall under the category of mysticism.

I love how you used the example of water. I've often felt that way, but you so brilliantly described it just then. I find myself shaking my head in agreement. You are very accomplished, relatively young.

What would you say to young scholars or young writers that want to be doing what you're doing? Any tips that you would give those that maybe are in school or maybe even other people that are looking to start writing?

I would definitely say that the main thing is to keep going, and that's not only in the work and what the work requires, but the work of living. Really do what you can to do your human work and make sure that you're good. Make sure that you're intact and that your intentions are clear because that helps your life. It helps your work and it helps protect you from people trying to change you too much, trying to change your aesthetic, trying to make you-- trying to force you into some compartment that is more palatable in this world. And that can be really dangerous for artists of any stage in their career at any age. But it can be actually, really heartbreaking for young artists, especially if you grew up in a place like I did, where nobody else was saying, "I'm gonna write a book." I was laughed at in high school when recruiters from the military or from different colleges came. "What are you gonna do with your life?" Oh, I'm gonna write. "Oh, that's ridiculous." It's actually not that ridiculous. There's many books in the world. I'm not even saying anything that's that dramatic. I didn't say that I'm gonna just haul off and become a figure skater all of a sudden and be in the Olympics, even though there's wrong with that. Actually, if I really wanted to start doing that at age 18, maybe that's possible too. So I think just to do the human work and to keep going and to trust yourself and really get comfortable with understanding what that means, not any shortcut to doing that. And I think that then you already have your validation, you already have your reward for the work that you've done. You can see expressions of your human work around you because of what is positive and the relationships around you. And no matter what happens in the world outside of you, you're good within yourself, you're good with the people that are closest to you, and you have a really rich base from which you can express yourself to the rest of the world. And I think kids seem to naturally have that, but sometimes it's filtered out of you and you're told that you're too sensitive or sympathetic or whatever. And I wish that that had been emphasized a little bit more, that things really-- however difficult and dastardly things look, you really can be okay. And many times it is true that your art can evolve you. It can bring you to another place inside yourself and to another circumstance in your life all together. And I don't think I knew that at a young age.

That sounds like excellent advice for aspiring writers, aspiring artists, and perhaps all of us to be comfortable in our space to look around us and to imagine whatever we want to imagine us turning into. So thank you so much for your time today and for this lovely discussion.

You have been listening to Rebecca Cruise's conversation with Ladan Osman about poetry, art as activism and the importance of staying true to your artistic convictions. For more information about Ladan Osman and her work, visit our website at cisworldviews.com, where you can also leave a comment about this conversation.

We always love to hear your thoughts and comments about this show. You can follow us on Facebook and Twitter at CIS World Views, and you can follow me @SuzetteGrillot. World Views at CIS is produced by the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Kaitie Holland and Audra Brulc prepare our research, and Jacque Braun produces the show. For all of us at the College of International Studies and the World Views program, and for Rebecca Cruise, I'm Suzette Grillot.