

*IN THE FOREGROUND:  
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING*

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

“A CRITIQUE OF WHAT ART CAN DO”: JENNIFER NELSON ON  
UNDOING MASTERY

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Transcript

Caroline Fowler: Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host, and director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

Sara Houghteling: For this season, you'll hear from me, Sara Houghteling, Special Projects Coordinator in the Research and Academic Program. I'm also a novelist. I'll be speaking with four art historians about the craft of writing as it relates to their scholarly practice.

I'm speaking today with Jennifer Nelson, who is currently a 2023-24 Hilles Bush Fellow at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute. Nelson is an associate professor of early modern art at the University of Delaware, and the author of *Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein's Ambassadors*, a forthcoming book on Cranach from Reaktion Press, as well as three books of poetry. They're also a founding editor of *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art*.

Jennifer Nelson: *I want the reader to leave my text feeling like they want to take what I did and run off and do their own thing with it, or alongside it. I want people to be intellectually moved. I think the only way to get there is if you surprise yourself. I just am super patient with myself at the end. And I put sentences on there that feel at correct, but also as if they lead somewhere else different from what I've already said. And I just have to wait and sit there for those sentences to happen.*

Sara Houghteling: Welcome to *In the Foreground*, Jennifer.

Jennifer Nelson: Thank you so much for having me.

Sara Houghteling: I wondered if we could start by having you tell us a little bit about your background, how you became an art historian, and in

particular, a scholar of 16<sup>th</sup>-century art history, and Europe's cultural construction of concepts of difference and community? And also, how does your MFA in poetry fit in there?

Jennifer Nelson: This is a great place to start. This is a complicated question. I'll probably go on a little bit long because I don't have a great, succinct, honest answer to the question. Not even to the part about how I became an art historian or a 16th century person, which I think could be surprising because giving some account of why you do what you do is the only way that anybody ever hires you to do it in academia.

In some sense for me, these two practices of writing are more psychic counterbalances than logically conjoined projects. I don't mean that they're counterbalances in a cool way. It would be really easy to say something more intelligible. Something like, "My brain loves sophisticated puzzles that are beautiful, like Holbein's *Ambassadors*, but my heart and soul are with the present, as a non-binary Filipino American with a very mixed class background." Or, "My earliest memories are of Kmart, not of an art museum." I wish I could say that, but if you actually read my art history stuff, it's full of my subject position, and the poetry is really full of descriptions of art.

So I guess like everybody else, my head's attached to my body! As a poet, I hate mastery. I was just giving a reading in Brookline to launch the book of the poet and translator and critic Lindsay Turner, and she reminded me of the boldness of just stating this fact. There was a Q& A, someone asked her about her work, and she said, "Oh, well, I don't know." Her poetry always came from this place of radically not knowing. And I was thinking that I myself have a poem in my first book titled, "No Knowing." And other art historians can be kind of snarky about this. But it's actually really important to me not to know-- to always remember that I don't know. So, refusing mastery, and beyond John Keats, of course, you know, the negative capability thing, I'm also shouting out Julietta Singh. Here is somebody who really theorizes this as an anticolonial value in her book, *Unthinking Mastery*. But refusing mastery is in some way going to be at the heart, I think, of most poets' approach to making, in order to make that sense of unmastery more fraught and more powerful, I felt I had to push it. I perversely sort of wanted to endanger it, not within the literature field proper. That always felt like too close to home. But maybe using

something even more powerful and capacious than literature. Something that I think actually contains it. That's the category of art. So I wanted to do a kind of comparative literature, but a comparative study of elite cultural production of the most challenging and obscure stuff that I could find and research and analyze. So that's really the more honest answer.

The narrative you bring up of being a scholar of difference and community--this is something, to be totally honest, I say in retrospect, when I had to write up my tenure case. One of the few ways to make all the things I've done make some sense--I want to keep being allowed to do art history, but really it's just leading with a refusal of mastery. To pick my future field back when I was picking it, I used a poetry fellowship to travel around Europe and visit all the major museums in all the cities that Rainer Maria Rilke had lived in. And I went to all these museums and I just picked the things that confused me the most. And it ended up happening in more than one place, but for example, the Van Eyck paintings in Madrid at the Thyssen-Bornemisza really got to me. I thought, "Why are these things doing the things that they're doing?" And now, almost 20 years after I applied to grad school from Madrid, I'm finally working out a theory of art based on what happened back then.

Sara Houghteling: I hear in what you're saying so many good lessons for young writers, about seeking out the things that confuse us can fuel our art and our scholarship for many decades. I'm reminded also of the beginning of your book on *The Ambassadors* where you write about how fragmentation of reality may be experienced by an individual or group as new through a necessity of existing in radically different contradictory contexts. And I actually found that kind of comforting on a personal level. I'm struck by the mirroring of the form and the content as much as it is about the fragmentation, both in the narrative that you've given us a glimpse into today and also in the introduction to your book.

Jennifer Nelson: That's a great connection.

Sara Houghteling: Thinking about your source material, I was struck by the mentions in some of the interviews with you, which I read in preparation for this podcast and also throughout your Holbein boo--in your poetry, I encountered a mention of Helen Vendler, who of course is the famous Harvard professor and the poetry critic, and also Christopher Wood, the

German Renaissance scholar who for many years was at Yale and is now at NYU and was your dissertation advisor. And these are two towering names in the worlds of poetry and art history. I wondered if you could give us a glimpse of something that one or perhaps both of these teachers taught you that still endures in your writing today?

Jennifer Nelson: Well, there is so much to say there. If it's okay, I want to add another name that listeners of your podcast might appreciate. Alex Nemerov. He was the DGS at the time when, in this crisis of too much mastery after my oral exams, he allowed me to take a two year leave to do an MFA. I mean, this wouldn't have happened elsewhere. You know, what an amazing mentor who taught this brilliant class on writing about art history. There's so much to say even just about Professor Vendler and of course Chris, my doctoral advisor. Professor Vendler was just like the most wild, and least-interpretively open professor I ever had who I still respected. I know you're not supposed to say this, but she was a blazing genius. She just had these organizing and lasering powers of this scientist, which she commanded as this English professor. It was like watching someone's powers open up a cipher of the world. She had these maniacal weekly assignments, which I might have discussed at some other point before, where we had to write one sentence each about three poems. And this one sentence was supposed to capture every single thing important about the poem's form and its poetic strategies. Some people would hand in three-page sentences. And I learned a lot about writing from that, I guess, but really it was just like witnessing her powers with language and world-building: building a parallel reality through and about language. That was really the influence. Here's something that occurs to me that's really nitty gritty.

Sara Houghteling: I love nitty gritty.

Jennifer Nelson: Okay, it has to do with the em dash. Y'all grad students, y'all need to reel it back in with those singleton em dashes. It feels like this is a cool piece of punctuation that allows you to preserve an ambiguous relation between two ideas. No, that just feels floppy.

Chris did not say that, I'm saying it, but he was the one that sort of started to help me reel in my use of this punctuation. And the rule is, you can only use an em dash when you're using it parenthetically. And it's a kind of

more porous parenthetical than regular parentheses. And if you're not doing that, you have to pick your juxtapositional poison. You've got to decide: *Okay, no, this is a colon. No, this is a semicolon.* You have to be more precise and admit to your readers how the ideas are in fact related.

If you're a relational thinker like me, this rigor can stand in for many other kinds of rigor. So try it out. That's my advice to you. Another thing I learned from Chris Wood, which was more by example—and the funny thing about being on this podcast, I'm really honored because I think I was one of the worst writers that's ever existed in grad school—I was just disastrous, but after I started teaching, I noticed something, which is that Chris was writing sort of similarly to the way he would teach. And he wasn't afraid to have tone, or to craft the conceit of having this live audience there. And I definitely write pretty differently from Chris, but once I made this observation, it was like he was giving me permission to write as if I was talking.

That was really fundamental in helping me break out of the problem that I was having. I was trying to write to the objects themselves. I was trying to find words that were adequate to the objects. And it was like poor Hölderlin translating Pindar. Or it was actually worse, because at least those two people are both using human language—even if the languages are separated by 2000 years, but they're still in the same language family. Objects don't even use words, at heart. This is how I realized you cannot try to be faithful to an alien except as an experiment. If you want to write effectively, you have to try to share the alien by being faithful to other people.

Sara Houghteling: So as we're already discussing, you've written this wonderful book, *Disharmony of the Spheres*. Could you give us an introduction to it?

Jennifer Nelson: I'd be happy to. I just had to do this for a methods class this week. I had to look back on this weird book that I wrote instead of turning my dissertation into a book. The *Disharmony* book talks about what happens when some educated northern Europeans of the Renaissance whose work survives as art, visual culture, scholarship, literature, curriculum design, et cetera, technology, design--when these Northern Europeans' identity formation project--which is how I think of the

Renaissance revival of heritage--when that project is sharpened by the threat of a Muslim invasion, by the rupture of an intra-European religious schism that itself is also often accompanied by violence, what happens when we bring these things together? And, okay, so here's the spoiler: what happens is that some of these people like irreconcilable difference. Or at least they're fascinated by it. They enjoy meditating on or playing with the idea that human salvation is actually premised on adherence to a single universal standard. At the same time, the world is imperfect and never adheres to anyone's standard.

So that was pretty abstract. My favorite example is let's say there's someone in Nuremberg, and he's making sundials and they don't work in Nuremberg, but they do work in Constantinople. And he's making them as souvenirs of the Turkish invasion of Vienna, which is like a week's ride away. And the sundials are so pseudo-Turkish that they even come complete with an indicator of the direction of Mecca. And then the second spoiler, I guess I would say, is that the stuff that I talk about in that book doesn't really come to anything in terms of intellectual and cultural continuities with the present, or even later in the same century, since the book's not about discourses of tolerance. I'm talking about people who enjoyed playing with irreconcilable difference. And that's something that's sort of too dangerous within imperial structures for it to be a dominant and sustainable cultural strain.

Sara Houghteling: Jennifer, I'm fascinated to hear that this wasn't actually your dissertation. That's mind-boggling that a book with this level of erudition and interdisciplinarity and that takes such a deep dive into the history of science, among many other things. What was your dissertation on that did not become this amazing book?

Jennifer Nelson: There was a chapter about Holbein's *Ambassadors* in the dissertation, but the dissertation was about early Lutheran art...and I came up with this word when I was writing *Disharmony*, about how early Lutheran art is self-dissimilar. I talked about it as an image, a practice of image making beyond likeness that disrupted its own sense of likeness so that early Lutherans would not be tempted to, you know, worship something in a sort of unified space, but rather find themselves able to bear witness to the various theological concepts that were crucial to the Lutheran faith. Thank God that that was not my first book, right?

Sara Houghteling: One of the pleasures of this podcast is getting to speak to different art historians about their writing process. I think it was Cammy Brothers also who said that her first book was also not her dissertation. So, one of the reasons that I've asked you to join us is because of the wonderful writing in this book. These are beautiful, precise descriptions. And I wondered if we could ask you to read one of them.

Jennifer Nelson: I really like that you've picked this passage. I really am so happy that you asked me to read from the ending because there's still much pressure on ending. And when I was visiting that methods class earlier this week, I got a lot of questions about my endings too, in particular my ending of my recent *Art Bulletin* article, which I wrote while I was at the Clark, in fact. And it's just nice to get questions like this because it is so hard to write endings and therefore it's such a relief to know they can't be so horrible if people want to know how I came to write them.

Sara Houghteling: You stick the landing.

Jennifer Nelson:

Holbein and whoever worked with him would have known the crucifix looked out. (I like to think Anne Boleyn would have known.) On the panel as it is painted, for whoever manages to see it or know about it, salvation is half-heartedly offered to the viewer who, probably having "solved" the anamorphosis and noted the complementary position of the crucifix from the right-hand side, nevertheless returned to the conventional viewing position in front, agreeing to play out the usual encounter between subject and painting. But the offer is limited: it turns out that the curtain, emblem of simulacrum, blocks full access and cuts Christ in two.

Early Lutheran theology, early modern technology, early modern humanism, and early modern portraiture all have something in common besides interest, on the part of their practitioners in this book, in accounting for imperfections in the world. All these cultural practices have been significant agents in scholarly narratives of secularization in European history. At the same time, though, amid



a historic fracturing of European identity, all the protagonists in this book put their ultimate faith in Christ. He was the reconciler of incommensurate difference.

The half-visible, half-art-cloaked Christ in the corner of *The Ambassadors* offers a self-annihilating, uncertain salvation. To appreciate incommensurate difference, without hubristically imposing or wishing equalization on it, may be the only meaningful form of secularization. Whether and how this may save anyone—or do something better—remains to be seen.

Sara Houghteling: It's such a wonderful passage.

Jennifer Nelson: I was so conscious of those parenthetical em dashes in the last sentence!

Sara Houghteling: But you earn them, you earn them at the end, right?

Jennifer Nelson: And they're parenthetical, so they obey the rules. Okay, when you write beginnings and endings, you're aware a lot of people are just going to read the beginning and the end, so you better make the end good. And even if someone reads the whole thing, that's the last thing they'll remember. It's dessert. I think your metaphor was good: stick the landing. For me, I'm actually really outing myself here, but my students all know this. I have another invisible constraint. I detest summary endings. I do not like summaries in general. In fact, when I was a kid, when I was in high school, I compulsively glossed all of the texts that we had to read, and I did not allow myself to gloss with summaries. So every single paragraph of a text that I read had to have a meta commentary.

Even if the commentary was just “throw away intro paragraph” with an arrow. Of course, I've grown up since then. I know you have to summarize a little, but I always want summary to be productive, and I always wanted to add something new. And in particular, at the end of a piece of writing, I want it to point somewhere totally new. I want to be generous, I want to be open, I want to err on the side of saying something strong and potentially wrong, rather than being milquetoast. I want the reader to feel like they have something maybe to contribute, hopefully not just as critique. But I would rather that than some weird shared self-satisfaction like, “Ah yes, we've finished and now we all agree.”

I want the reader to leave my text feeling like they want to take what I did and run off and do their own thing with it. Or alongside it. I want people to be intellectually moved. I think the only way to get there is if you surprise yourself. I just am super patient with myself at the end, and I put sentences on there that feel correct, but also as if they lead somewhere else different from what I've already said. I just have to wait and sit there for those sentences to happen.

Sara Houghteling: I'm glad that you mentioned tone before—the journey of tone that we've traveled with you, as a narrator, in order to arrive at this place where we exist in uncertainty and possibility alongside you. I'm also struck reading the book by how often your writing is funny. You call Jacques Lacan “the arch melancholist”—I had fun kind of keeping track of these funny little epithets and these wonderful turns of phrase. the “crypto compiler,” James Elkins, of whom I'm a big fan. And “poor Panofsky.” There's a writer who writes on ancient coins named Guillaume Baudet, who you call his tome “girthy.” And I wondered if you had any models for this wry narrative voice, if this was something that you had to fight to retain or that editors have welcomed. I think it makes a lot of sense in context of trying to capture something of the spoken lightness of your spoken voice in this printed form.

Jennifer Nelson: I think to answer the first part of that—Chris Wood, Alex Nemerov, these models for writing in graduate school—I don't think I have the same sense of humor as those two people, but it's more that they made me think that having a voice was possible, even welcome, that it's an important part of this project. I really appreciate the second part of your question because what you suggest, I think is right: peer reviewers often don't like it. But I've often had really great editors and they'll find me at least one reviewer who does like it. And so when I have to do that thing you do with peer review where you defend yourself when something's important to you, I just always like lean on the review that's says, “I appreciate the author's lively tone.”

For me, humor is part of that road to good faith with readers that I was talking about earlier. It's part of my hope that an audience exists—my will to build that audience—to build a bridge to them.

Sara Houghteling: You have a new book on Cranach coming out soon. Were there any writerly lessons that you carried over from *Disharmony* to this new book or anything that you said, “I *want* to do that again,” or anything when you completed writing it that you said, “I *never* want to do that again”? Or that was a lesson I learned of how *not* to do things?

Jennifer Nelson: I think the lessons of how *not* to do things are all about image permissions and images. Those are special realm of purgatory. I think maybe not for this writing-related podcast, but you know, Listeners, feel free to contact me if you ever want to like share woes about that part of your process. For the Cranach book...I cannot tell you from graduate school and the miasma of nonsense that I used to write, what an achievement for me personally writing *Disharmony* was. For Cranach, I wanted to turn the clarity that I was so proud of achieving, you know, up to 11. I wanted to really run with the idea of a trade book because it is in the Reaktion Renaissance Lives Series. It's technically a trade book and I've had some fights with people I respect about whether that audience exists anymore—the audience for a popular book about an art history topic. I believe that audience exists and I definitely want to invite them to exist.

So the Cranach book is really an experiment in luring people in with clear, jargon-free (as much as possible) writing, and then slowly building in some maybe unexpected, serious, scholarly, and theoretical claims without losing my sense of humor—without losing my sense of talking to people. And I really, I really, really want it to work, but I guess we'll see!

Sara Houghteling: Yes, I can relate—I think from my own experience teaching writing, that sense of conveying the gradual, dramatic build of a narrative to one's readers feels very important.

You're also one of the founding editors of *Selva*, which first published in October 2019, with an issue entitled *Painting After 1968*. I'd love if you could tell us about this journal and if in particular, you could draw our attention to a piece that you've published in *Selva* that you're especially proud of, or that you think is a particularly good piece of art historical criticism, and why it stands out in your mind as a particularly good piece of writing.

Jennifer Nelson: *Se/va*, in my mind, is the sort of anarchic haven from institutional art history, a place where you can get top quality intellectual and scholarly endeavors, but you don't really know what kind you're going to get. You know, you can really tell which of the issues are guest edited because they're much more even and consistent. We have a couple of guest-edited issues coming up. By the way, when I'm describing *Se/va*, I'm not speaking for Danny Marcus and Daniel Spalding, my coeditors. My opinion's really my own here. For me, you know, when I look at our internally edited issues, they sort of revel in the moment, in spontaneity, I think, without compromising on the high-level work.

For example, my own issue on the concept of the classic has so many different kinds of writing, in terms of length, approaches, op-ed vibes, archival vibes, really whatever people wanted to bring to the question I posed about what kind of art survives and what kind of art should survive. And people just took that in so many different directions and I was so happy.

But at this particular instant, one piece I keep coming back to is Shawon Kinew's piece in the second issue about a translation of a text by Hans Sedlmayr on Rubens. The second issue was about reactionary art history. And Shawon's piece, it really reckons with the aftermath of the genocide of European Jewish people, and the influence of both Nazism, and the German Jewish escape from it, on art history. And honestly, that essay itself would be an exquisite answer to the question about how poetry and art history can connect. You know, I wish I could claim it as my own answer. I could never have produced that answer. It's all Shawon. I think everyone on earth who cares about art history should read that piece.

And if I can, the other piece I teach a lot, the one I teach the most, really, and think is a great model for students today, is Ananda Cohen-Aponte's piece on reimagining archives of lost resistance and revolt in the Andes and the Caribbean, and that's in the *Classic* issue, issue three. You know, there's been a lot of discussion about how much and in what way Saidiya Hartman and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, how their critical responses to the failures of archives should be incorporated into art history. But [Cohen-Aponte] just does it. She did it beautifully. She offers this way forward that carefully supplements the archive with contemporary artistic reflections. I just love that piece so much.

Sara Houghteling: I wonder we could transition now to your poetry, which I've loved reading over the years. By way of transition, I wanted to start with this metaphor of anamorphosis that comes from the Holbein book, and perhaps if you could both explain anamorphosis in terms of the Holbein book, because it struck me that it could also serve as a metaphor for your poetry, and I wondered if it's something that you're actively engaging with in your poetry? And, as kind of a corollary to that question, is there ever something that starts off in a scholarly article for you where you think, "No, this is better for my poetry," or something that starts off in your poetry where you decide, "The place for this is in my academic prose?"

Jennifer Nelson: So I'll start with anamorphosis. There are other ways to define it, but I'm going to sort of define it strictly mathematically: anamorphosis is a kind of perspective where the viewpoint, the viewer's position, has been constructed somewhere outside the actual possible space of viewing, or at its very edge. I'm not sure how to connect that to my poetry because I try really hard not to do that to my readers. I don't want to put anyone in an impossible place. I am interested in the technique is expressing a kind of awareness of the core joke of realism. That's how I see it. But I wouldn't want to perpetrate it on anyone. I really, I'm very poor in irony as a human being.

But I think per the last part of your question, absolutely: I always feel like my poems are kind of testing grounds for things that I want to eventually get into in my art history. And Peter Bruegel the Elder, best example, in some ways is my prime target. He's been in my poems for a decade now. He's supposed to appear in the project I'm working on now, but it's taking me forever to feel like I can publish something art historical on him. And so much of my thinking about Bruegel has appeared in poetry already--it's like I'm really still trying to work it out. And I think this actually brings us to my poem, "The Protest Market," from the second book of poems, *Civilization Makes Me Lonely*. You know, I was just thinking to myself, this is actually the poem that I most revealed to myself the uncertainty that I'm still holding, in poetry, for Bruegel.

Sara Houghteling: Well, that seems like a great place to pause and if I could ask you to read the poem and then maybe take us through it a bit.

Jennifer Nelson: I'd be happy to do that. Under the title it says, "After Audre Lorde's *Power*." And if you don't know this poem and you're listening to this podcast, you should probably pause and Google "Audre Lorde *Power*." Read that if you haven't already because it's just so important. It's such a vastly important poem. Okay. I'll read mine:

"The Protest Market"

I imagine the advertising in Rome  
for whatever was sold in the streets was also  
rhetorically rich and dumb  
anaphorae for mass-produced  
amphorae  
we commit to [a]  
we commit to [b]  
  [c] ... [d] ... [e] ...  
as long as the plaque could be seen.

I have not been able to touch  
the plague inside me.  
But unless I learn to use  
the difference between signage and poetry  
children will inherit my flaw  
and their marches will be blind  
leading the blind  
into a ditch  
in front of the church  
a muted palette on linen  
underpainted peasant eyes  
showing what art has done.

Who the fuck is Pieter Bruegel?  
Sure he's always watching me dance  
but he's also caught between his dancing  
and pleasing the rest who watch the dance.  
At least when my friend gaslights me  
about suffering the cruel  
optimism of striving parents  
and denies the case of Michael Brown

I understand why he must  
and can never perish.  
The collision of realities reveals  
he is the alabaster 6'2" structure  
of all imperial oppression  
forensic science, evidence  
gladly smiling true discomfort  
at a faculty party where two  
men of color waltz  
atop white nods  
before speaking only to each other.

The difference between poetry and signage  
is being ready to sell  
yourself instead of victims  
then annihilate your buyers.

So that's that poem. I guess the part about Bruegel, that I'm still holding—  
obviously there's a lot of other stuff in that poem I think in many ways  
more important—but specifically from my writing practice, Bruegel's self-  
awareness, the awareness of potential audience, the awareness of himself  
already as an audience to his own subject matter, these layerings, I don't  
really grasp it beyond experience. So it's still in the poems only.

Sara Houghteling: I think when I saw this poem online originally, it was  
published with a Bruegel alongside it.

Jennifer Nelson: I don't remember. That's definitely possible. I know some  
venues have been able to do that and it's always really great when they  
can.

Sara Houghteling: I want to say it was “The Brooklyn Rail.”

Jennifer Nelson: You're so right. It's the Naples *Blind Leading the Blind*.  
Sara Houghteling: Just looking at the poem on the page, if you could talk  
to me about its form or any particular of the turns in language, I'm struck  
by. The terms from “anaphor” to “amphorae,” or I love the sounds of

“ditch” and “church.” What are some other things that stand out to you as you read this today, that you could share with our listeners?

Jennifer Nelson: For this particular poem, it was the challenge of: how can you follow Audrey Lorde? I mean, you can't, but you have to, and I find that in her poetry, her word play is more to the point and direct than mine, and I wanted to try my hand at it—bitter and strong, like, “anaphora/amphorae,” “plague/plaque.” That was one element I was thinking about. And then I was also really interested in Lorde's work. There's a lot of variety in line length, but in this particular poem that I was emulating or following, there's something about the pace, of alternating between a medium length to a very short length line that she does that I wanted to try too, to propel a kind of critique of what art can do.

Sara Houghteling: To continue that [critique], I'd like to turn to another poem from *Civilization Makes Me Lonely*, where we see how you're in dialogue both with artists and contemporary poets—that this book feels like it's also in dialogue with Claudia Rankine in very interesting ways—another wonderful poet who writes about visual images, who's very committed to the incorporation of visual images in different ways. So could we turn to “Murder She Wrote Art History as Ekphrasis”?

Jennifer Nelson: This comes from the same book and, you know, I wrote it because, again, this is going to be very honest, I was really frustrated by Jaś Elsner's take on ekphrasis. And ekphrasis is the use of poetic or intensified language to write about works of art. And I was sitting there in Ann Arbor during my post doc, preparing to attend a seminar that my extremely smart friend, Athena Kirk, who's now at Cornell, had organized in Bloomington at that time for the very brilliant Verity Platt. And even though I didn't know Verity then, I respected her. Everything Athena, my friend, does is precise and intelligent and warm. So I really couldn't understand, to be honest, at that time, I could not understand why they were making us read this text. Just to say I will never be as renowned or respected as Jaś Elsner, and normally I really hate ankle-biting critical behavior, and that's to use the term my mentor at that time, Celeste Brusati, would have called it “ankle biting.” I just couldn't deal with this essay, and I had to find a way to get through it. So, the night before, I was supposed to drive really early in the morning, I turned on “Murder, She Wrote,” which at that time was still on Netflix. And. Using my experience with Oulipian constraints,



which I picked up in grad school at a workshop at the old Proteus Gowanus space in Brooklyn with Wendy Walker and the late, great Tom La Farge. So I was thinking about these Oulipian constraints and using them, I crafted this poem where each line begins with a part of the Elsner text I happen to be reading and ends with a dialogue from “Murder, She Wrote” that I happen to be hearing. And somehow, this just worked.

Sara Houghteling: That's a wonderful origin story for this poem.

Jennifer Nelson: It's an update to that compulsive tic from high school--I can't leave a text without pushing at it.

“Murder, She Wrote Art History as Ekphrasis”

Simple talking about a plot  
far from being a rigorous pursuit, she thinks  
art history cabin fever  
certainly since its founding you got a good recipe for crow

Transformation from a thing that signifies by volume,  
that the US weather service warns  
Shape, definitely on the way  
Visual resonance, for heaven's sakes, don't  
texture your back out again

The art historian may take his or her own pictures asleep in  
the van,

in which case the “objective” hello

is a 1939-45 war. Do you like to tango?  
Yet the problem is that what we adduce as formal in my class  
is in fact not the men's room

The main group shows partial overlaps on the plane; “get up  
here fast!”

the figure who falls into the barrel, to repeat  
*Allegory of Gluttony* just north

of the tapering fingers, Sheriff,

the bow very long now  
the quiver very terrible.  
perspective here and there, but I thought  
the chair-back was odd, Grandpa  
(if grandfather lived alone)

The maker this morning  
in this final meditation was shot  
The *Rondanini Pietà* was Michelangelo's last statement on his  
sons

The process of its rise is reacting, a  
fall and rise again, in the European artistic tradition: you  
don't remember  
its limitations, spending the summer

leaping from the described image into one's own argument  
more than in judging why I don't believe for a second

Sara Houghteling: So with that wonderful leap into white space at the end of the poem, I wonder if you could tell us about an object or a place or a question that has your attention right now?

Jennifer Nelson: This is going to go in a really different direction. Maybe it'll come back in the end. I'm really fascinated by 1560s and 1570s Germanophone maps of the Ottoman Front, and what's now Hungary and the Northern Balkans. And there's this particular category of souvenir of the Ottoman front that I found that I've been trying to figure out for a couple of years now. And it's essentially an engraved siege portrait. There's three of them so far. I can't exactly call it a genre, but what they're doing is they're hybridizing all within the genre of the news map or news picture.

This is still part of the same project that I started defining at the Clark two years ago, but I'm trying to think about the tension between mastery and aesthetic experience. Because the mastery is implied by the cartographic knowledge, notionally in service of sort of a military conquest, but really targeting bourgeois consumers of street fair prints in Nuremberg and Vienna, and other Germanophone cities. Siege information is appearing within the early history of celebrity culture. You know, I discussed this a bit

in the Cranach book—history of Reformation portraiture, circulation of Reformation leaders’ portraits.

What's most interesting to me is that what I'm calling “siege portraits”—they're often beautiful. So suddenly, because there's this portrait in the foreground, the siege map in the background also becomes beautiful. There are more sky effects, there's more artful uses of the burin, the needle. The technique is shifting towards affective purposes while still marking out military events precisely in space.

I've been thinking a lot about beauty and information in this project. It's only in talking to you that I realize that these things are a little bit similar to thinking about the tension between poetry and art history. So, you know, thank you for the context to make that comparison, to make that little leap.

Sara Houghteling: Jennifer, it's just been so inspiring to talk to you. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Jennifer Nelson: Thank you so much.

Caitlin Woolsey: Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the resources referenced in the conversation, please visit [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). This program was co-created by Caroline Fowler and myself, Caitlin Woolsey and produced by me, with music by Light Chaser, sound editing by C. J. DeGennaro, and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Sara Houghteling.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally-recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors, past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all.