

Recall this Book 60

July, 2021

Sean Hill and Elizabeth Bradfield (EF)

Elizabeth Ferry:

From Brandeis University and also our domestic spaces, welcome to Recall this Book. Today it's my great pleasure to invite a guest, Sean Hill. Welcome, Sean. And co-host Liz Bradfield from Brandeis University and we're going to be having conversation about Sean's poetry and related pathways.

First, I'd like to introduce Elizabeth Bradfield our distinguished co-host for today. Liz is the author of several books of poetry, including her most recent book *Theorem* in collaboration with artist T Antonia Contro. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of Broadsided Press, a monthly broadside publisher, and she teaches poetry at Brandeis.

Sean Hill is the author of two poetry collections *Dangerous Goods*, which was awarded the Minnesota Book Award in poetry from 2014, and *Blood Ties and Brown Liquor* named "one of the ten books all Georgians should read" in 2015. I presume that's the state of Georgia, not the nation, although I'm sure that people in the nation of Georgia should also read it. And he's received numerous awards, including fellowships from Comic Con in the Region 2 Arts Council, Minnesota State Arts Board, Jerome Foundation and many other honors. He's served as the director of the Minnesota Northwoods Writers Conference at the Mjy State University. And he's also a consulting editor at Broadsided Press.

So we thought it would be great Sean if we might start off by having you read a poem.

Sean Hill:

I would love to. I was kind of torn between which poems to read. I want to read a new poem, one that's not in a book yet, but hopefully will be soon. The title is "Musica Universalis in Fairbanks."

[see link in post for text of poem]

Elizabeth Bradfield:

It's so great to hear a new poem from you Sean, and what I always love about your poems is the way. The way that they interweave and conversation with themselves the way that they evolve the way that they morph from one thing into another and reconnect, and offer these surprising juxtapositions, the way, for example, we went from the lark to the hand to the raven...

That's such beautiful work. Thank you.

SH:

Thank you, yeah. I mean that's what the language offers. I keep sort of trying to think about how we think about ecosystems and the the planet. And the things, the things that get moved. And you're sort of taking me away thinking about how we think about things like the house sparrow. Correct me if I'm wrong with that. That's also a non-native species.

EB:

Right, that's right, yeah.

SH:

Right, and you know, we don't think about them generally the same way as we think about sparrows. At least they don't get sort of broadly in the culture the same kind of bad rap, and actually right now I have some house sparrows nesting in a birdhouse on our garage.

I saw the starlings like my wife is like *all these cute little brown birds out there*. And I'm like, *it's a non-native invasive species!*

But also like it is a cute little brown bird.

And then the starlings were coming around, like trying to peek and see what's happening in there. And it's like this moment of like, well, how do I think about the starlings in this moment, right? They're just they're trying to get by.

And again, I'm kind of curious like I don't have a poem about the house sparrow, but that feels like a space to think about how we think about other and othering each other right?

EB:: So and I think this is in your poem too, but of movement and who gets to move and what's the impetus to move? You know, in some in some cases of animals shifting ranges it's not through the deliberate introduction of something like it was with the starlings, sometimes its range expansion in relation to climate change, so that kind of tied to us. I don't know. It's yeah, that idea of migration shifting patterns where it's natural - big air quotes - and where and where it's unnatural and then in your work how much that ties to human movements as well, which is super interesting.

SH:

Yeah there's the the eruption of pine siskins like this year, right?

And we get those things that happen every now and again. And what does that have to do with like our action, like climate change that we have had some hand in, right?

Yeah, those are our questions I worry about, not necessarily on the page, but they're in my head like a lot of the time. And yeah, who gets to move?

EB:

I mean, can you talk a little bit about that "Dear America" letter?

SH:

Yeah, I was asked to take part of this epistolary project, right? Like write a letter to America. It was like, I don't know what I'm going to do, and it actually it came out of them like, oh, we love. We would really like these postcard poems. Can you write something like that? And I I'm I was like maybe let me see and and no I couldn't. I think I had too much space that I needed to fill and it was too big, like writing a postcard to America didn't seem doable to me in the time, and I had this trip coming up with my dad and so it gave me the opportunity to think and and we're taking notes about our travel. Because travel for me, it gives me perspective to sort of reflect and sort of pull back and sort of see where where I am come in like physical space but also in political space. The essay is about you know, driving like four days across Canada with my dad which was little is once in a lifetime trip. I don't know that we've ever spent four days to get noticed and two of us like. You know, in our lives before that.

I've always had problems in border crossings and then in just like then also we talk about having problems at border crossings. You have to think about what a border is.

What is it like to physically stand on the border, the straddle the these you know the line that bisects [and] demarcates the nations. It just made me think about like what is it that is being kept on either side of the line, uhm? And also it just like I writing an essay that's a travel log I got to focus on nature and scenery and those things so it's really kind of a cool project that felt like, you know, I I could get at these, you know ways in which our lives are bounded, and I think they're like there were these moments in it with my father, who was born and raised in Milledgeville, GA and spent much of his life there, uhm. sort of getting him as far away from Milledgeville as I think he'd ever been and taking this slow trip with me. It allowed him to see some things and allowed me to see some things about him and that you know was asked. You know we were in the car for four days and I sort of asked questions about how his life had been. He was born in the 40s, late 40s and so like he grew up with Jim Crow and so like I, I want to ask about that, but I didn't want to ask too directly about that so I just I. I asked this question about it. What was the big change in your life that your lifetime that that you know just sort of sized societal shift?

This thing had happened and and there are lots of them, and so he's like, you know, cell phone radio communication. I don't know what to do with that, "Dad, like, there was a period when, like you were not an equal citizen," and he's like "Oh yeah, that that happened too."

And so, like this weird thing about ways in which we sort of normalize things, internalize things, and how we do view our lives was kind of interesting for me.

EF:

I just there's there's something that I thought was really intriguing about that essay. Because it had the form of a certain kind of genre, right of this sort of travel, narrative and reflection, but it was doubled because it was you and your father, and there are these moments in it. And that was one of them that you just described where sort of your expectation of what he's going to say is kind of confounded and and then kind of doubles back.

Then you sort of, you know, have more conversation about it, but but there's all these moments like the scene in the motel where I mean I'm describing it as a scene 'cause it has a sort of cinematic quality, but where your responses and his responses are kind of set side by side and that he, but not necessarily always in the same way that certain things that feel like threats to him don't to you. And then do. And that also seemed really

important to put in a letter about America right from outside of America and I, I just thought that was really fascinating.

SH:

Yeah, thank you. I mean that that's part of the the work too. I'm thinking about ways in which our lives are bounded by our lifetimes and and you know. That's our context, right? Like you know my self is different from his self. My experience was different and part of that had to do with like how they raised me.

I listen to too much radio. One time I was listening to a show and they were talking about sort of the immigrant experience and their first generation second generation and how like parents are trying to shape the life of the child, like what they tell the child and what they don't. And like my parents didn't really talk too directly about segregation.

I think they didn't really want to burden me maybe with that. And so I grew up in a recently desegregated South. Not really understanding how it had affected them right? And in a in a direct way.

I mean, I could see it on the edges of it, like the way that they were around white people and how they observed me with white people. And what they sort of expected to happen and how they were encouraging of oh, we're gonna talk to these people. But yeah, that fascinates me. And also because now I have a son I'm thinking about his world, his America is going to be different from my America. I don't know exactly how, but it. I mean it will probably be. It has to be. It can't not be, you know. That's the generational bounding of our lives, right?

That's part of the essay, that doesn't really sort of get at too much, but it's it's there.

I think there's a follow up essay. Actually, they're working on that where it touches on those things.

EF:

Yeah, it seems like it's in there and it's sort of not only that your past and his past are different, but that that makes your presence different too. It's like you're on two different trips, right? Because of that, even though you're also on the same track.

SH:

Right, right, right? And you know. And also, yeah, it's two different trips because of the past, I guess this is technically speaking speaking part of the past, but like you know I traveled much more than he had. I'd been to Canada. I actually took them, my dad and my mom to Canada once.

'cause I lived up in northern Minnesota and my mom was like I wanna go to Canada and so they came up to her visit and we went across the border and spent the night and Winnipeg and I think it was interesting and strange they had Indian food for the first time in their lives.

And the last time.

And as soon as we got back across the border and my dad, we've stopped at a cafe and my dad was trying to order Southern food. There was a waitress. It was her first day on the job and she was like "I don't understand. Sweet tea I don't know what you're talking about.." this is way Northern Minnesota and she had to call the manager over. I'm like "Oh my God."

EF: Moments with one's parents.

EB:

Yeah, but I wanted to ask you about influence in your work or other books and writers that have shaped you in the ways that you've approached some of these poems that we've talked about today or that feel like they're a current kind of feeding your practice.

Yeah, who would they be?

SH: There's this book by CS Giscombe titled *Into and Out of Dislocation*. Giscombe's known as a poet. But this is kind of a memoir. A book of prose, also a travelogue too and I got this book right before I moved to northern Minnesota and there's just some of the parallels and ways of thinking about that he was doing in this book influenced *Dangerous Goods*.

He was into riding his bicycle and he had these rules for riding his bike, and so I was like, "I'm gonna ride my bike. I need to ride my bike and I need to get out." So it's like it got me out got me out of nature and like you know on these trails. But he was in that book. He was looking for a possible ancestor. So he talks about sort of his growing up as an African American man and also, losing an arm at a young age to an accident.

There's all these things that are happening, but at some point he's like. You know he's an adult, as a writer, come thinking about, uhm, you know, a project. He comes. He finds this guy, John Giscombe, who was a Jamaican pioneer and BC so a Jamaican in British Columbia: you're making a name for himself and there's the like their landmarks named for this guy. He's like, "maybe this is an ancestor."

EB:

I know him, I know Giscombe because of *Giscombe Road* the book of poems you wrote about this investigation and now I'm super curious to read the prose as a follow up and how that refracts poetry.

SH: Yeah. And you will love it I think.

Yeah, and so him thinking about Giscombe, John Giscombe, you know, sort of got me in the mind of thinking about the people that come before, right? I think there's a way in which. I do that work sort of in a community, in *Blood Ties* and *Brown Liquor*, and I think about family and try to do some of that work, but moving to Bemidji, Minnesota. I was like "who was here before me" and I think I was thinking actually just musing about it without thinking about too hard the time and just kind of happenstance came across mentioned in a flyer of a lecture about this guy named George Bonga, who was an Afro Ojibwa.

So like, that's like three things right there, right? Or one thing, right?

And I was really excited about him and I couldn't wait the two weeks for the lecture. So I went to the Historical Society and imaging Minnesota and was like "I need whatever information you guys have on George Bonga." And they're like "we don't know this guy, but we have a file on this other guy since you're interested in African Americans, you know, in Bemidji history" and so yeah, that's they introduced me to this guy Charles W. Scrutchin, who was a lawyer who moved to Bemidji 1898=99.

EB:

I love that Scrutchin poem.

SH:

Thank you, and so yeah, it at some point for me that became looking for ancestors, made me think about like thinking about the ancestors, right? Like

maybe think that I need to like figure out who was here before me as a way to see how I fit. And it's kind of a comfort to and I I feel like now I that's part of my project is understanding the narrative because, you know, we talk about representation a lot like oh, you need to see people like you to think about how to you know how to be, and I think that's there's truth in that.

And so, like me, looking to see like OK, these are people who are in some way like me who were here. I'm not the first and I don't need to be the first. You know it's actually really good to know that I'm not the first.

EB:

Lonely to be the first, right?

SH: I mean, it's lonely enough being the only, right, or one of the few. But like to sort of reclaim the narrative and like well we were here.

EB:

I think it's important.

SH:

Yeah, yeah. And sort of in terms of who represents me and thinking about like because of the way race is constructed in this country. I'm a black man and and I identify that way and so I want to identify other black people who preceded me in a space and a place. It's comforting, you know, I can be here. I don't know if everyone else knows I can be here, but I know I can be here.

EB:

I mean, I know your new writing is taking you back to Georgia as well and into history.

You want to talk a little bit about that.

SH:

Yeah, yeah. The Georgia history I'm looking at is actually around the governor's mansion come as a place, but also the administration administration of Joseph Emerson Brown, who was the governor of Georgia right before and during the Civil War, so he was elected

and came into office and. 1858 and just kind of was there through the Civil War.

And I'm interested in someone governing during that period and also the fact that there were Black lives that were part of that administration at the time. The governor's mansion there weren't. There was no household staff that was like a permanent staff and part of the governor's mansion. There wasn't money appropriated for that, so the governors brought their slaves with them to serve them and to be the servants of the governor's mansion.

So, things came up, you know, life happens and I, but I was like I'm not gonna leave this project because it feels more relevant, differently relevant once Trump was elected, I was like, OK, now we have a different way to think about this. And then January 6th shifted it again 'cause.

You know in 2019 I think it was I was doing more research on this project was like oh I gotta go find these things I need to find. So there were some pieces I really wanted to dig around and look for and and that digging more things came up and I found Governor Brown's letter in which he sort of 'cause all of the Confederates had to be pardoned and they had to say, make this oath that they won't. They wouldn't commit treason again. They were traitors and there's paperwork. And I have copies and photographs of the paperwork, and I was like. OK, this is going to work its way in somehow 'cause it felt important and then January 6th happens a year and a half later and I went OK I really need to get this thing out.

EF:
Before more sedition happens.

SH:
Right, right, right.

So yeah, you know those those things like I'm like you. These moments you have in the in the in the archives, in the library with the research you're like. Oh yes, yes.

And then, like there's this other energy that it needed to make something of that. And I was like I oh OK, you know one of these days, you know. And I was thinking about that project and after the Civil War there's also like one sort of step toward my exploration of westward migration you know, so I'm interested in like there we have. We have a lot about the great

migration to the north, there's people, Black folk who went West too, and so that's another part of the project. I'm thinking about black people in the West post Civil War.

And then I'm in the West. So again, it's like this sort of idea of like trying to figure out like the parallels. Where's the representation? Who were the people? How did they do it?

EB: Bodies in space and time.

SH:

Bodies in space and time. Yeah, so I'm supposed to be writing poems about.

Montana history black folk in Montana history. And that's my next project. But I also have other places I want to write about in the West. And you know, there's Captain Healy. That's another strand of the thread of the the westward research. Michael Augustin Healy was a captain in the revenue cutters and the sort of the federal authority in Alaska. furring the last couple of decades of the 19th century, but he was born to an Irish immigrant father who was a planter and one of his father's slaves, who his father seemed to take as his common law wife. They had ten children together, all of which he sent north to be out of slavery.

But he was born in 1839, you know, and not too far from where I was born, you know.

And those were thinking about about that. Like oh, this guy.

He's born a county over and had this trajectory. He ended up in in Alaska and being a famous hero of the time to some, towns named after him. Yeah, towns named like yeah that's how he was introduced to me actually. 'cause I have a question I ask when I go places like *what are the where are the books about black people? Is there a plaque about black people that were here; tell me about the black people who were here?*

I never walk in thinking I'm the first Black person so like there has been somebody and this woman was like, well, *Captain Healy was Black* at the gift shop at Denali.

EB:

For those for people who don't know, Healey is the town that's just adjacent to Denali National Park. It's a very, very small town. It's a a lot of people work in the park. It's a coal, coal mining town. Also, there's a big coal operation there. Right smack dab in the middle of South Central.

SH:

And so yeah, I started digging and I was like, oh, we're like neighbors across centuries, kind of.

EF

So we do have a stage of many episodes where we talk about recallable books, books that feel connected to the conversation that we've been having and and characteristically for me, one has come up in my mind in the course of our conversation.

So maybe I'll just start off and then hear from you guys. this whole questions of movements of things that are human and more than human and also the the central north of the country makes me think of a book by Lorine Niedecker called Lake Superior, which is the account of a of a trip that that she took with her husband to Lake Superior and a lot of it is about the rocks, which I'm very into rocks, so you know the rocks that also are now the bones of humans.

The division between the rocks and the water and the humans is not where we always imagine it to be, or it isn't as firm as we imagine it to be. And that's really and and in a sense I see that in some of your poems and in our conversation now, there's not so many rocks, but there's lots of birds, and there's also in stars and and senses and mountains and so that's where where that took me. So Sean, do you want to tell us a recallable book?

SH:

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino. I'm thinking about him. We didn't really talk about cities so much. Maybe it's part of it, but like in the book Kubla Khan is being reported to from Marco Polo about the empire in different cities and you get these dispatches. Here's what this city is like, and they're really kind of very sensory, but also kind of abstract.

I read that book and it makes me think about the city and what cities are in this. In what feels like a useful way, you know, like that cities are things that didn't just happen.

Or if they do, there is also there is some design in them like you know nothing really just happens and and so you can have some perspective on what is happening in a space, like in a community. I've had these thoughts when I've gone other places and I think that book kind of helps me think about it like when I come.

What used to be Barrow now come up the Aquick UM Barrow Alaska now to Galveston Alaska come yeah I landed there and one of the first things someone told me like in the tour 'cause that's when you land there, if someone picking you up there like you're going to get four tours of this place, at least four tours.

And they're pointing out places and it's sort of like an igloo is the word for basically, for domiciles. So everybody lives in the igloos. Whatever they look like. But I was like thinking about like why did they look the way they look, right? What is this imposition that feels more out of place than what was here before, which seemed like part of dealing with the environment and the ways in which we don't deal with our environments anymore, you know.

You know at some point I'm just like, no, we're just bringing in this colonial sense of what a city should look like and feel like, and what the houses should be. I mean, I live in, you know, a really nice sort of brick Victorian house, but I don't know why it's in Montana. I like it. Shouldn't necessarily be here though. So yeah, that that book makes me think about cities and the things we get up to as a species when we get together. And I think in interesting ways.

EF:

OK, thanks. Liz?

EB:

Well, I'm a little torn. I've got a couple of books I'm recalling. I guess the first was the book *Plainwater* by Anne Carson, the poet and scholar, but in part because it's about movement and journeying, I'm assuming it's an autobiographical semi autobiographical about her trek along the Camino Real and her conversations over time and as with a lot of her work, it's strange and cerebral and then also kind of oddly passionate and so when I think about your work Sean and the way that that travel is also so full of desire often and movement can be full of desire, whether it's like a an intimate romantic desire

or just curiosity and yearning. So I think about her book also how it references and reaches to pull in all this different stuff she's largely using the haibun form in in that book, which is a form I know you've used Sean. In fact, I learned of the form from you.

So I'm thinking about that book and I'm also weirdly was thinking a little bit about *The Ice-Shirt* that novel. Have you read that, Sean, by William Vollman? It's such a weird book.

I don't know that it's a perfect book. It's strange, it's about it's about movement from Europe into Greenland in particular, and kind of looking at Vikings and encountering Inuit in Greenland and Canada. It's a strange, troubling roil of a book that gets a little fantastical and surreal, and I don't know why that one coming to mind, but I think something about encounters and movement and an openness toward not quite a magical realism, but a strangeness that wants us to step out of ordinary time, yeah?

EF:

Great, thank you. Well, I think our time has come to say thank you very much to Sean for joining us and for such a great conversation.

EB:

Yeah Sean, thank you. You're so generous with your thought and time and I wish we got to hear more poems, but I'm glad we got one poem from you.

EF:

And a new one too which is very exciting.

Thank you.

Recall this book is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry: it's affiliated with Public Books . It includes Plotz, Ferry, Elizabeth Bradfield and a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston area and beyond. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy, Fly away.

Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen and production assistance, including website design and social media is done by Nai Kim. We are grateful to Mark DeLillo for advice on tech matters and to university librarian Matthew Sheehy and Dean Dorothy Hodgson and of the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms or

suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly or contact us via social media and our website.

Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts.

Might be interested in checking out past episodes, such as Lisa Dillman on Translation and David Ferry and Roger Reeves on the underworld in poetry. Thank you to all of you and we'll see you next time.