

## PHILIP MATTHEWS — ARTIST NARRATIVE

I am a poet from eastern North Carolina currently residing in rural Wisconsin where I direct programs at a nonprofit art and ecology center. Anchored by site-specific meditation and performance, my practice of the past decade has investigated spiritual queer power, questions of home and ecological shift.

I have published two books of poetry: [Witch](#) (Alice James Books, 2020) and, in collaboration with photographer David Johnson, [Wig Heavier Than a Boot](#) (Kris Graves Projects, 2019). This collaborative body of my poems, David's photographs and our video poetry has been exhibited at the Colorado Photographic Arts Center in Denver, Filter Photo in Chicago, FotoFest in Houston, the High Low Galleries in St. Louis, the Moreau Art Galleries at Saint Mary's University, and is forthcoming at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and Griffin Museum in Boston. My poems have appeared in Poetry Northwest, Tusculum Review, Denver Quarterly, Connotation Press, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Sonora Review and elsewhere, and I was a finalist for the 2017 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Fellowship.

Throughout my career, I have worked at the forefront of cross-disciplinary engagement, seeking out those whose art engages with pressing social issues. In both curatorial and personal practice, I have worked with artists on long-term projects that intersect poetry, drag performance, photography, video, and meditation writing. I believe that art communities are strengthened by these kinds of interactions and I make an effort to invest generously in my peers' practices as well as my own.

My two books revolve around an entity called Petal who began appearing in my poems in 2012 like a recurring dream. In 2014 she lifted her head from the page to speak, and appeared in a collaborative exhibition with photographer Carly Ann Faye in an artist-run space in St. Louis. Both persona and co-author, Petal's mind was always inside or in close proximity to my own. Her name is inspired by the chakras' "petals," increasing in number: radii extending from the self outward, allowing for a continuous stream of upload to and download from the environment.

These poems speak to a complicated relationship with religion, especially Christianity. My mother is a Southern Baptist minister, I was raised in the church, and at the time I recognized myself as queer, I (wrongly) felt I had to choose between a physical or a spiritual life. Embodying Petal through drag performance in isolated pastoral landscapes was an important technology to work through this, as was Yoga, because Yoga uses (rather than resists) the body to access metaphysical, spiritual knowledge. I am a 200-Hour Certified Yoga Teacher, having completed a year-long training program from 2014-15.

David's photographs provided one record of Petal's and my personalities, blurring art-historical feminine and masculine postures and gestures. My poems provided another which elaborated upon the lived experience of performing or, sometimes, obscuring or protecting the self from being seen. Thus, a continuous exchange between photographer and two subjects in one body reflected the complications of power and gender expression through the history of photography

and religious life. Witch provided further ground to sever attachment from an old self so that a remade self could step through. Poems about birth and raising emerged, the relationship between parent and child as it relates to the energy which is gifted, entrusted to the poet as a steward. This was a different, more mysterious and tenuous framing of the relationship between poet and poem than that of the poet owning the poem, staking claim to it, which is an egoistic gesture and perhaps an imperial one.

In the dunes of Provincetown, Massachusetts where I was twice a poetry fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center (2016-17, 18-19), I called to Petal through meditation, movement, and ritual magic, and poetry was the language in which she answered. My role as a poet (witch) was to become a channel, to render those records as legibly as I could while maintaining the imprint of the electricity that passed through them: semipermeable containers, spells.

I have a B.A. in English Literature from Tulane University, where I graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, in 2009, and received the Senior Excellence Award from the English faculty. I completed my MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Washington University in St. Louis in 2011. Upon graduation, I was awarded the Junior Writer in Residence Fellowship. As a second-year student, and continuing during the post-graduate fellowship period and beyond, I taught workshops in poetry, creative nonfiction, and led an independent study in poetry and photography. My student evaluations were excellent and I received an Outstanding Instructor Award, presented by the Women's Panhellenic Association.

From 2013-16 I curated public projects at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, emphasizing artist-driven thinking, cross-disciplinary collaboration and community-directed action. The Pulitzer, housed in a building designed by Tadao Ando, is an urban contemporary art museum dedicated to civic engagement. Project highlights included:

- [Ellipsis](#) (April 15-July 2, 2016), an exhibit of video poetry and essay by Thylia Moss and John Bresland, and the inaugural presentation of "whiteness, inc." by Claudia Rankine and John Lucas;
- [How to Grieve and Dream at the Same Time](#) (May 31-June 4, 2016), a residency with Bhanu Kapil that gathered two research workshops of St. Louis-based bodyworkers, and writers of color, queer writers, and writers who identify as women, in discourse around systemic trauma and community healing; the residency culminated in a collective poetry reading and public ritual;
- [Kota ProtoLab](#) (Oct 16, 2015-Mar 19, 2016), an interactive art and technology lab embedded within an exhibition of African reliquary figures;
- [Press Play](#) (May 1-Sep 12, 2015) a five-month public engagement series to investigate the acoustic potential of the Pulitzer's Tadao Ando-designed building;

- [Marfa Dialogues / St. Louis](#) (July 30-Aug 3, 2014), a series that explored climate change science in relation to artistic practice and civic duty;
- [Reset](#) (Jan 17-25, 2014), nine days of experimental programs that included breakdancing, fort-building for kids, the U.S. premiere of John Cage's Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras, and [drag performance featuring Raja](#), on a commissioned floor sculpture by David Scanavino;
- And an ekphrastic reading series (2013-16) featuring [Anne Waldman](#), [Mònica de la Torre](#), [Treasure Shields Redmond](#); [CAConrad](#), [Christian Bök](#), [Claudia Rankine](#), [Kate Durbin](#), [Paul Legault](#); [Aaron Kunin](#), [Cole Swensen](#) and [Ronaldo Wilson](#).

I left the Pulitzer in fall 2016 to accept a 2016-17 Writing Fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. During the fellowship and afterward, I taught as a visiting writer in the Provincetown Public Schools and elsewhere before receiving a fellowship from the Hemera Foundation to study "insight dialogue," a form of Buddhist meditation consisting of facilitated exchanges between a "speaker" and "listener," at the Southern Dharma Retreat Center outside of Asheville, NC. This week-long retreat provided a useful new tool to refine internal dialogue between Petal and myself.

In fall 2017, I taught an experimental professional practice workshop at the Kansas City Art Institute and, since then, have provided unique consultations to artists and writers at a transformative point in their practice, integrating technologies such as Tarot, Yoga and meditation. I returned to Provincetown in 2018-19 as the Second-Year Fellow in Poetry (selected by Robert Pinsky) and served on the jury to select the 2019-20 poetry fellows. During these years, I lived off and on in my hometown of Wilson, NC where my family still lives, to work in phases on an ongoing project called Family Death Work that involved dehoarding my grandmother's home. I also created poetic meditations that were ecological in theme and responded to the work of other artists:

- [S.E.A. a practice for Cassini and you](#) (2017) at PLUG Projects in Kansas City, MO: Exploring themes of Service, Empathy and Annihilation, S.E.A. was a guided meditation situated within Jennifer Sea's exhibition No One Looks After You, which opened the day that the satellite Cassini propelled itself into Saturn, destroying itself; marking one month since Cassini's destruction and the 20th anniversary of its launch from Earth, the meditation asked participants to blend Cassini's perspective with theirs;
- S.E.A. built on **Multi-petaled, the chakras an access point** (2015), my work for the group exhibition Jack N Jill curated by Jennifer Seas at the Granite City Art and Design District in IL: On two meditation cushions in the middle of the gallery, I invited one visitor at a time to sit across from me (dressed as Petal) and receive seven short poems, chanted three times each in succession;

- **Untitled meditation for Casting Shadows, the Kansas City Art Institute Biennial Exhibition** (2017) at the H&R Block Artspace: Visitors were invited to become mindful of energy transfers between themselves and the artwork on view through standing, walking and sitting practices; also explored points of “borderlessness” and communion with handheld objects made by KCAI Sculpture students;
- [Performance for Turn of the Tide](#) (2019) at the Hudson D. Walker Gallery, Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown: During the opening reception of Visual Art Fellow Sara Dittrich’s exhibition, I sat for a pranayama meditation in which my breath activated her time-lapse video of the Atlantic Ocean’s tide via a wireless sensor;
- [Blue Estuary, a collaboration with Maura Pellettieri](#) (2019) for Sarah E. Brook’s Viewfinding at Riverside Park in New York City: Maura and I co-wrote and performed a site-specific poem, in the form of an ecological dialogue, as part of an Alternative Queer Pride event at Sarah’s public sculpture.

I currently direct programs at Wormfarm Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to “building a sustainable future for agriculture and the arts by fostering vital links between people and the land.” In 2020 our small but ambitious team modified the [Farm/Art DTour](#)—a 50-mile agri/cultural excursion through Sauk County, Wisconsin’s working farmland—to meet the challenges of the pandemic and address issues related to the environmental, economic and human health of our interconnected rural-urban region. We raised significant public and private funds to realize this free event, and hosted [artist-led civic engagement with Rural Urban FLOW and Local Voices Network](#) leading up to the election. A swing county in a swing state, Sauk County was identified that year by the Hill Magazine as one of “ten counties to watch.” We commissioned 17 artists to install large-scale, site-responsive artworks in farm fields hosted by local landowners after the last harvest, as well as a GPS-based Soundscape of local sounds, music and interviews with farmers advocating grassland-based agriculture. The 2020 DTour drew 18,000 visitors even during the pandemic because it had social distancing built in. We received the Governor’s Tourism Award for Arts, Heritage & Culture for this effort to support 150+ artists, food entrepreneurs and local businesses in a difficult year.

Since then, I have supported the development of a two-year strategic plan, in which we worked with collaborators across art, agriculture, and conservation sectors on [a series of experimental “Test Plots”](#) in 2021, to trial ideas that are now being expanded for the large public stage of the 2022 DTour (October 1-10). Through this work, we’ve strengthened relationships with researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison via the Grassland 2.0 initiative (funded by the USDA), and added important layers of rural cultural data to the study of regenerative agriculture in our region.

Earlier this year, I completed the nine-month Sauk County Institute of Leadership program and I currently serve as the board president of Reedsburg ArtsLink, a local arts agency. I have begun to grow my Tarot business by reading monthly at a downtown Reedsburg shop, and meeting with clients in my broader network by Zoom. I conducted several virtual classroom visits in 2021

to discuss *Witch*, at the University of Kansas, Boise State University, Lawrence University, and the University of Texas at Dallas, and this past spring, I visited UW-Madison's Arboretum in person as a guest speaker for Leila Chatti's graduate poetry workshop. Recent poetry readings include the Watershed Series at the Art + Literature Laboratory in Madison, the Visiting Writer Series at Saint Mary's University, Pulitzer Arts Foundation's 100 Boots Series with Tongo Eisen-Martin and, pre-pandemic, the Dogfish Series in New Orleans, a special "Utopian Library" event with CAConrad at the KCAI Gallery: Center for Contemporary Practice, and the fort gondo series in St. Louis with Ada Limón.