



Playing—and Playing With—Sonnets: Reflections on An Intermedial Poetic Experiment

“One day I wrote her name upon the strand,” begins Spenser’s *Amoretti* 75, as he muses on poetry, love, mortality, and remembrance. One day, by a Northern California strand under a cold Oakland sun, a small community drawn together by pandemic-induced lockdown rediscovered and remade Spenser’s sonnet as a “sonnet song.” Tiffany Jo Werth, Spenser scholar and former president of the International Spenser Society, found herself exchanging tunes and drinks with her neighbor DJ Mike Frugaletti, perhaps (I like to think), while playing a round of *pétanque* on the makeshift court designed by Bertrand W. Delacourt. In this unexpected synergy of Renaissance scholar, French designer, and Brazilian-trained DJ, a poetic experiment was born: The School of Night Collaborative. Over the subsequent months, the group reimaged three Renaissance sonnets set to house music. The first performance of these Sonnet Songs was slated for 6 January 2023 at the Foundry in San Francisco as part of a night-long house music party alongside the MLA Convention. But, in an allegorical twist worthy of *The Faerie Queene*, an “atmospheric river event” intervened and this *imitatio* for the twenty-first century took place as a bespoke performance piece among an eclectic group of academics and neighborhood music lovers.

In what follows, I interview Werth and Frugaletti, as well as Delacourt and Margaret Ronda (who gave voice to the sonnets), alongside Sawyer Kemp and Jeff Dolven,

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who were at the inaugural performance. Susanne Wofford also generously shared her experience of listening to the sonnet songs in San Francisco and though her voice does not appear in this piece, our conversation shaped many of my questions and reflections. The interview unfolds in four parts: the genesis of the project; the process of collaboration; the event in San Francisco; and a final set of reflections on what this poetic experiment shows us about these sonnets.

For those coming to the Sonnet Songs for the first time, I recommend beginning by listening to these versions (linked below). For those curious but skeptical about these kinds of projects, let me briefly outline what draws me to The School of Night Collaborative and similar approaches to early modern poetry.

Though we know little about the actual performance contexts for English sonnets, we do know that they were read aloud and widely circulated in manuscript. *Imitatio* as a practice is improvisatory and playful, drawing on a body of knowledge shared by a community (or coterie) that the poet can invoke, subvert, and celebrate. And though Renaissance sonnets both shape and evoke intimate, often private, encounters between self and world, they were self-consciously also written for a variety of publics. The School of Night's Sonnet Songs reinterpret the spirit of the sonnets' conditions of performance and dissemination for a contemporary audience and, in so doing, asks us to reflect on the lyric's relationship to music, rhythm, tone, and voice in new ways. House music, with its literal penetration of the body by sonic vibration, insists that the poems also enter into and reanimate our bodies. This act of *translatio* continues a transtemporal dialogue inflected by *serio-ludere*, the serious playfulness of art made personal once more.

There are both scholarly and pedagogical affordances to such an experiment. As Werth discusses below, Sonnet Songs offers a pathway to make these poems live once again for our students and is an invitation to them to play and experiment in the vein of Renaissance poets themselves. Speaking as both a poet and scholar, Jeff Dolven reminds us here that “there’s a way in which, working across idioms, working across media, working across senses, encourages playfulness...it lets you think about mood in a different way, about feeling...in a way that can sometimes get lost when we’re in our drier passages of exegesis.” Affective, emotional, and sensory encounters with poetry are repeatedly emphasized in the discussion here and serve as a reminder that we would do well to find a critical idiom that rejoins rhetoric and form with embodiment.

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Finally, this collaboration beyond academic borders dangles an invitation: artistic co-creation with our objects of study might open new ways to engage creatively and critically with our field. We might be more than glossators and commentators, and might renew a popular, living tradition across the centuries. As Sawyer Kemp suggests, this too promises a “public-facing approach” to the humanities, one that sees us not as guardians of an ossified tradition that must be preserved in rarefied spaces, but as dynamic conduits through which Renaissance lyric continues its journey into the future *as lyrics*.

--Ayesha Ramachandran

The Event & The Interview

School of Night Collaborative at MLA, San Francisco, 2023

Hosted by the SF Foundry, 1425 Folsom St, San Francisco, CA 94103

Cast:

Interviewer: Ayesha Ramachandran (AR)

Collaborator and Director: Tiffany Jo Werth (TW)

Collaborator, DJ and Music Producer: Mike Frugaletti (MF)

Collaborator, Designer, and Voice: Bertrand W. Delacourt (BD)

Collaborator, Voice: Margaret Ronda (MR)

Audience Participant: Sawyer Kemp (SK)

Audience Participant: Jeff Dolven (JD)

Sonnet Songs:

Edmund Spenser, [Amoretti 75, "One Day"](#)

Lady Mary Wroth, from [Pamphilia to Amphilanthus](#)

Louise Labé, “[Je vis je meurs](#)”

The Genesis of an Idea



Figure 1: The School of Night Collaborative. Left to Right: Margaret Ronda, Bertrand W. Delacourt, Tiffany Jo Werth, and Mike Frugaletti

AR:

Tell me how this collaboration happened and what the inspiration was for this experiment?

TW:

I have had a long-running desire to bring together different media, and in particular, to hear poetry in different media. In my classes I often taught excerpts from the opera *Dr. Atomic* by John Adams that has this wonderful rendition of a [Donne sonnet](#). And, I thought, what if I set sonnets to house music, which I've always really enjoyed? That was the genesis for this project. During COVID our neighborhood community came together

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and DJ Mike would oftentimes play for us in our shared courtyard to stave off boredom and isolation. That's when I began to plot. Hey, now I know a DJ. What if I pitched him a collaboration?

MF:

I can just elaborate a little bit more. Over the years that we have become friends, in part because we live so close to each other, we would often exchange music. I would provide Bertrand and Tiffany with some tunes and see what they liked. So, when she proposed this idea of what she wanted to do, she sent me back some of the tracks that I'd given her and said: I like this track and I like that track. It helped me understand the styles of the music that she wanted to incorporate with this project. So, it helped that we'd had this existing relationship prior and that we were able to [freely] talk about it. And then it organically just grew into this project. It was a good starting point being friends and being close neighbors.

AR:

So let me ask you this Mike. Setting sonnets is different from setting other kinds of voice for house music. Were you interested in the fact that they were sonnets? Or for you, was it just like, "oh this is interesting text that is different from what I normally work with"?

MF:

Yeah, for sure, I was looking for some kind of new inspiration and writing lyrics isn't my strongest point. The music side of it and the sounds are more my forte, so having the vocal already set was a great starting point. I was able to start working with them without knowing the meaning. And then, after I started working on the tracks, Tiffany would fill me in a little bit more on what the sonnets mean and the deeper meaning behind them, which helped shape them as I moved forward. It was good that she didn't share them with me prior, because I could just play with how they sounded over music without having an idea of the thematics behind them. Once she did fill me in, then it all really kind of came together. It was a pleasure working like that because it was new for me working that way. Usually, we'll make the music first and then write some lyrics to go on top of that to fit the music. This time it was kind of the opposite direction. It worked out really well.

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AR:

Bertrand, did you do the initial recordings that Mike worked with as you were figuring out what the synergy was going to be?

BW:

It was so impressive the way Tiffany directed all of us. If I remember right, our first recording was in English, the sonnet with all the sand and the water. I was super nervous, and at first I was like: “nah nah I don’t want to do that,” but once I did it, I said: “hey let’s record some more.” We began while it was still the pandemic and so it was difficult to organize a studio. Mike then organized a recording room in his house. On our first recording date, I asked Tiffany to stand behind me. I asked Mike if he minded if Tiffany might whisper to me the intonation of the lines. Because English is not my first language, I was nervous if I was doing the right intonation at the right place. I said to Mike: “can you cut out her whisper?” And he said: “oh don’t worry, I can arrange something.” But, then, in the end he was listening to it and he loved it. That’s why you hear the whispering on the Spenser sonnet song. It gives a doubleness to the track that’s super interesting.

AR:

Bertrand, you and Tiffany went to a recording studio and just recorded the words, and then Mike you played around with how the words went with different styles of music that Tiffany liked, or did you decide first this is the kind of thing that works with this recording?

MF:

So, in the beginning, based on the music references that Tiffany sent back to me of the style of music that she liked, what I did was create a 16-bar loop of a sound that I liked based on some of the things that she liked. So, I incorporated pads that come in and out to make it more of a deep house track, this gave it some earthy synthetic sounds. I just started there with something simple. There were four tracks that she sent me as reference and these things stood out in all four tracks, so, I thought, ok she likes these elements, I’ll put these in and then I’ll make a little loop. Then I sent them the loop and they were able to practice at home. And once they were comfortable they came upstairs and we used my

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closet as the vocal booth, which was deadened by all the clothes so it actually worked out great. I played the loop for a good 6 to 7 minutes. I repeated it and let them go on in the closet. They did the vocals, they did it again. They did it again, and I chose the ones that worked right. I didn't really have to cut up and manipulate the vocals at all, all I had to do was spread them out a little bit more over the beats.

When we listened back to it and heard Tiffany's whispers, it just came together. Music is happy accidents. This is not what I intended but this is even better than what we'd hoped for. It just worked out really great. We used that model for the other two tracks. Where I would work on a beginning loop, give it to them, they'd practice, and they'd come upstairs, and then we'd take it from there. Talk about it happening organically, that's definitely the way that it worked out and set the pace for the rest of the project.

[[Link to](#)] Edmund Spenser Amoretti 75 One Day Sonnet:

<https://schoolofnight1.bandcamp.com/track/spenser-amoretti-75-one-day>

AR:

Tiffany, I'm curious because what Mike and Bertrand are suggesting is that in some sense it's your aesthetic taste in house music that dictated the way in which the sonnets found life in this form.

TW:

I guess I hadn't thought about it that way, but when we began to talk about this particular project, Mike said to me, "are there particular sounds that you like?" He's given us quite a bit of wonderful music; it's what I listen to when I write. I picked out the songs that had what I felt were interesting kinds of vocals, so speaking not singing per se, but speaking, and then with the beat in the background. Then it also just sort of happened that the three sonnets have quite a different sound, and that evolved organically.

AR:

I want to talk more about the feel of the sound, and really, the question of tone, which is something that when you talk about poetry is so vexed, but which I think the house beats

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amplify in a really important way. Tiffany, tell us about how you chose those particular sonnets: did you already know you wanted to do these?

TW:

Spenser was at the heart of this project. I immediately knew that I wanted to start with something from Spenser. Probably the one sonnet that I teach the most from Spenser is *Amoretti* LXXV. I now call it the *One Day Sonnet*. And I love that, just because it also deals with repetition, like waves, like house beats. So, it felt like the place to start. Donne was my original third sonnet that I had intended to do. I knew I wanted to do a sonnet written by a woman, so I knew I wanted Lady Mary Wroth. But as we were working with the English language with Bertrand, particularly after the first Spenser sonnet, he said you know it's really difficult to read that older very formal language. What is "eke"? I thought it was only fair to him that we include a French sonnet. I asked a colleague of mine, Claire Goldstein from the UC Davis Department of French and Italian, what sonnet she teaches most often that might be useful if I were to do an interpretation of it. She immediately sent me the Louise Labé. I also knew that in addition to Bertrand's voice that I wanted to have a female voice. My colleague, who is both a critic and a poet, immediately came to mind: Margaret Ronda.

So, I asked her.

The conversation turns to Margaret Ronda

AR to MR:

What was it like to be asked to be The Voice?

MR:

I felt very intimidated to give voice to Lady Mary Wroth, who I just think of as sort of a deity. And obviously, it's a persona poem, but just thinking, it almost seems like it's giving voice to eros, or something, an erotic principle. And so I felt a bit nervous about how to enact that. And one has always, I think, funny relationships to one's voice.

AR:

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It's distancing from your body. Your voice is--distorted is the wrong word—but it's integrated into the synthesizers and the beat, and it's stretched out. So, in some ways it is not your voice anymore. Alienating is such a great word, because it is about the separation from the self, right?

MR:

Well, that sort of mediation in a particular way [is strange]. There's the first strangeness or kind of separation of one's own voice in recording it, and then there's another kind of separation and distance that emerges when you hear it stretched out and reflected through beats and music. It kind of reverberates back to you so strangely. Which I think is a wonderful way of thinking about this project more generally—it has this sort of estranging and renovating relationship to sonnets; to how we hear the sonnet, the duration of a sonnet, and the intimacy and brevity of a sonnet, and it's all getting reimagined through this different temporality of the song and different kinds of sonic forms of play and rhythms. And it's very different from the experience of reading a sonnet, whether that's silently or even reading it out loud.

[[Link to](#)] Lady Mary Wroth from Pamphilia to Amphilanthus Sonnet 1:

<https://schoolofnight1.bandcamp.com/track/wroth-pamphilia-to-amphilanthus>

AR:

It's so good! I have a question for The School of Night. One is, talk to me about this name, about the amazing logo that Bertrand produced.

TW:

When we were beginning this collaboration, I knew immediately what I wanted to call it. It had to be The School of Night. What else could it be? The School of Night is a radical coterie of philosophers (maybe what we now call emerging scientists) including amongst them Sir Walter Raleigh and Thomas Harriot, who were gathering together and discussing heterodox ideas about the way the universe worked. But, some critics say, also espousing atheism and skepticism. So, they were really a kind of forward, free-thinking intellectual movement. Obviously also the invocation of night felt right, as house music

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usually happens at night, in clubs, so that seemed appropriate. Of course, I couldn't resist the "school," because I imagined the recordings being used in pedagogical settings. And, by the way, they have already been taught in a couple of different universities, which makes me very happy. I'll let Bertrand speak to the creation of the logo.

BD:

I knew I wanted to have an Elizabethan ruff, and at first I did a sketch by hand, and then after that, I drew it on my tablet, sketching it there so that I could change the size. I made the ruff bigger. I wanted the helmet (headphones) very simple, as well as the eyes, everything, it's all simple lines. I put a little QR under the eyes too so you can scan and go straight to listen to the tracks.



Figure 2: Original hand drawn logo for The School of Night

TW:

And the expression, I love the expression on the face. It's very simple; it's only lines, but the face is totally just blissed out.

BD:

My cliché idea of most DJs is that they hold the headphones like this. I was thinking they're always tilting their head on the side to hold them on the shoulder. Mike approved

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of it too, and he said it looked very good, and I was like okay, then we keep it like this. The only thing I did in the end was to add a frame almost like a shield, like in the old days.

AR:

Like a herald.

TW:

I'm glad you picked up on that Ayesha, that's exactly what I wanted, some sort of heraldic device or frontispiece feel to the logo.

AR:

Yes, it's so clear. I also love that it's basically DJ Mike in a ruff.

BD:

That's exactly what it is.

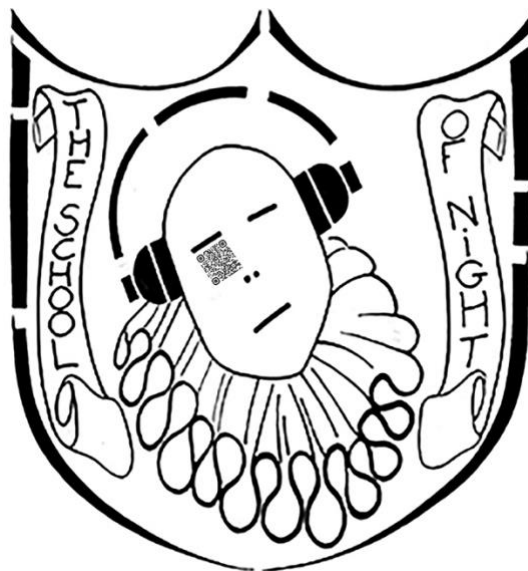


Figure 3: Final Logo for School of Night

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Process: Forging a Collaboration

AR:

I love the asides that Bertrand has in his reading of the Labé sonnet. I love that Mike preserved them, so it has a meta-effect. It's also an interesting commentary on what it means to do this project, right?

BD:

I think it was a way of trying to make it casual. The first time I was reading those words, especially in French, and I say: "oh wow they're old French!" And I say it in French, and Mike kept it. It's like the same thing with Tiffany's whispering. Also, on two of the tracks we have some stupid stuff I say. Not stupid, but meaning they have nothing to do with what we are working on. I was like "enough," like I said the same text ten times, I say, "okay enough," and then Mike uses it to make something interesting.

MF:

Sometimes these things happen. I took your voice and turned it into a musical element. When I was going to export it, I didn't realize that I had two layers of your voice, one in French and one in English, layered on top of each other and it was unmuted. So it accidentally played, and I'm like wait a minute, that had a good little rhythm to it. It was just another happy accident. When I copy and pasted it, it made this really funky little loop and it changed the tonality of the song; it created this upbeat happy vibe to kick it off. Because the first Spenser sonnet was deep, the second Wroth recording was a little bit more electronic-synthy-like, a little darker. And then the third Labé sonnet was more classic French disco house, which was elevated by this accidental little layering of both English and French.

[[Link to](#)] Louise Labé sonnet Je vis je meurs:

<https://schoolofnight1.bandcamp.com/track/lab-je-vis-je-meurs>

AR:

I love it. This actually leads me to ask about the process by which you crafted what became

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these relationships between the house beat, the musical elements, the voice. I don't read the Labé sonnet as funky and upbeat and so I saw that poem in a totally different way. There's a sense in which there is an ironic parody to the poem, which is what this version is, right? It's a melodramatic poem and there's something about the French disco beat that highlights the irony and that makes it self-reflexive in a way that I don't normally hear. And so I am wondering, Tiffany, was that intentional, or did it just happen? Because of the synergies that are being produced between the three of you, Bertrand's ironic distancing from the older French syntax, and then Mike figuring out how does the sound layers over the beats?

TW:

It's funny because obviously this is a sonnet that I am less familiar with; it's not a sonnet that I teach in my repertoire. I've read Labé, but I haven't had the pleasure or the opportunity to teach her. But when I was explaining the difference in tonality, this one is in some ways the most melodramatic. But also, in that melodrama I almost could sense there is an irreverence, a playing with the form.

AR:

Mike, I just want to ask you, when you hear Tiffany describe the poem in this way, and when you hear Bertrand kind of teasingly complain about it as he's speaking it, do you capture that in the music, or is that a happy accident that fits in an interesting way, or do you switch around how you think about the rhythms and their relationships to the texts when you hear that description?

MF:

So, my understanding of these texts is not nearly as deep or clear as Tiffany and probably Bertrand. She explained the first one to me in a way that encapsulated the theme of it—the tides, love, erasure, eternity. I started that track like I mentioned earlier with certain sounds, that came in and out, synthetic sounds. And then when she explained what that meant thematically, I just thought: wow those sounds now sound like the ocean, the tide coming in and out. That really triggered me into thinking about how the sounds could be used to represent these texts in a way that was very audible. Not that I would have to

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understand exactly what all these texts meant, because I honestly didn't. What I understood was the tone of these texts and how I could use sounds to elevate and amplify that. So, with the first sonnet by Edmund Spenser, the synth pads resonate as the ocean tides. The second sonnet recorded was Lady Mary Wroth with all the fire in it, so I took the fire crackling sounds and moved them to place it on beats, so I could have the fire in place but not be too distracting.



Figure 4: DJ Mike Frugaletti at the Foundry SF

AR:

So as a DJ/musician you said your usual MO is to begin with the loop and then find the set of words or the vocals to overlay. Do you feel like it changed your way of thinking about your own practice to be starting from thinking thematically and tonally about these texts and then have to figure out what your music was going to be?

MF:

For sure, for sure. There were many years that I just took a pause from making music because the way I was doing it was getting stale to me, and so this really brought me back into it. But having new ways of thinking got me excited, and really just got me thinking outside of the box in a way that when I started the next track I knew what to go for in

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terms of, this is how I want it to sound, this is why I want it to sound like that, and here's how I'm going to make it sound like that. So, it put things in place, and as opposed to just starting from scratch and seeing what happens, if that makes sense.

AR:

One of the things that's so striking about these tracks is that house music is so much about the rhythm and the body, right? I mean you want to move when you hear it, there's a way in which it vibrates literally, somatically. And so, I'm curious, Bertrand when you were reading, and Mike was playing the loop, were you feeling that in your body, so that you were matching your voice to those rhythms? Because particularly in the Labé, the rhythmic impact is very different than how you might read it if you were not in some ways responding to that rhythm in your body.

BD:

It's like Mike says, we don't have the knowledge, we've never been to one of those classes, for years and hours of learning the way it should be done. But, Tiffany was supervising me: she was saying you have the rhythm even in the poetry the way you say it. Then I tried...It's like I was always keeping that beat; because it was my language I was able to read it almost on the beat and faster...

AR:

Exactly! That's what's so striking.

BD:

It's stuff like this—that we all bring something different—that made the project so very interesting. I think it's for that too that the process was kind of magical.

TW:

If I can just take us back for a second to what Bertrand was saying about rhythm. When we did the Spenser sonnet first, I was trying to explain pentameter, and English rhythms. I think it made Bertrand more nervous, because he was sort of afraid because French intonation, as you know, is so different from an accentual syllabic verse base. He was

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having a hard time with the English multiplied by the Spenserian syntax. He was sort of, what is this? And so, with that first track, I finally said to Mike make us a little loop so that Bertrand can at least have something to latch on to in terms of a rhythm or a beat. And that I think really helped. So, Bertrand was really responding in a lot of ways to the music, those loops that Mike would send to us to set the mood. For me as an educator, I think that was an interesting moment in the collaboration because when I tried to explain the theoretical, this is how verse works in English etc., it didn't go over that well, but then when it was embodied, when it was literally made into a sound, a vibration, then he was able to work with it.

The last thing I wanted to say was just about the intro, this is one of the things that I learned that was really fascinating. When Mike first was making these tracks he said, you know that this is not going to be a three- to four-minute track. He said I can do a shorter track, that's how long a song usually is, but he said, if you really want to have a house track it has to be longer, and it has to have these long lead-ins, because that's what the DJs use to mix with. So, you'll notice that all three of them have long intros and exits and that's so that they could actually be used in a DJ set. One of the happy accidents of that, at least for me, was the way that it ended up emphasizing aspects of the sonnet. In particular, with Spenser's sonnet, I'd never really thought as much about that "one day" that opens the poem. And all of a sudden that contrast between the one day—the specificity of that—with the constant repetition and echo of eternity created an effect I thought was beautiful, and something I hadn't quite noticed in that way when reading or teaching it.

BD:

It was Mike's idea.

MF:

That was just an attempt to make a filler for that empty space of the intro and the outro. We have to have space for DJs to mix in and out, so something needs to be there, we can't just drop the vocal right in the middle, we have to lead up to it. So "one day" seemed to work, I didn't know the relevance of it, it just worked. And so, once I did that and played it for her, she was like, yes! Oh my god! And so, again, the power of collaboration and the

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accidents that follow just turned out to be really fruitful.

AR:

As academics we talk a lot about rhythms in poems, but most of the time, people can't feel them. And I think one of the things that's so wonderful about what you've just described is, again, just feeling it in your body and allowing that to actually inform the poem and the act of reading it. So the amplification of the rhythmic underlay and the differences especially in the Spenser and the Wroth poem are really striking and I can see how, Mike, that comes out of literally the collaboration of amplifying the rhythm over the words. As you said, it doesn't matter what the words are, you actually just hear their rhythm along with the rhythm or against the rhythm.

I'm really curious, Mike, about how you broke up the voicing, the vocals. You said that you actually didn't splice them, and that you used it as it was read. But particularly for the Wroth sonnet, the fire one, the pauses and the silences, really the back and forth between when we are in the music and when we actually take these breaths, or these pauses in the lines. How much of that was Margaret's reading? How much of that was a decision that you made? And that's [in] a different way the effect for the Labé too.

MF:

Well, first off, Margaret was awesome, her voice was made for house music. So, it was an absolute pleasure working with her vocal. But it's different working with these sonnets as opposed to regular tracks, you follow the same pattern for music—with the chorus, the break down, the reprise, and all that. But for these sonnets, they're pretty short in terms of a six-minute song that you have to stretch. Tiffany would print them out and stress important words or phrases to be used. So, I used them as is, meaning I didn't manipulate them, I didn't rearrange them. I just kept the sequence the same, but just spread it out more. So, we had a buildup of the first minute or so, to lead in so the DJ can mix in. And then once the song was actually going, then I'd kick off the vocal. But just space it out naturally and I would pull it out, pull out the beats and some of the other musical elements, to give those important phrases their moment and then bring the music back in.

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AR:

So, Tiffany, you were the one who made the decisions then about where the caesura would fall, and where to take the break, and which words to emphasize?

TW:

Mike would do a draft once we had the reading and he would mix it in, and then Bertrand and I would listen, and we would say: “oh, could we maybe have a little bit more pause here, or a repetition there.” And then I had annotated the sonnets that I gave to Mike, just to say here is the crux of this stanza, or here is something that could be repeated, to bring out some of the emotional tonalities that are in it. So, it was a bit of both, but then at the end, it really was Mike deciding in terms of where it fit with the rhythm to do those loops, to do those repetitions, to make the echoes, that was Mike.

MF:

House music, it’s got this very, it’s as you said, it’s feeling, it’s a sensation, when you’re on that dancefloor, you’re visualizing how you feel that music with dancing. And so, you have to give people a moment to breathe and then give them the opportunity to really feel it when it comes back. So, a lot of these sonnets they have these phrases or these moments where it just felt powerful, and it just felt like that was the right time to remove all the other elements, let everyone focus on this word and then drop the music back in and bring it back in full swing. So, again, organic, it just happened.

AR:

I especially love the moment with the last line of the Wroth poem, like we take the music completely away and we have this kind of dramatic breath and that it comes right back, that was really inspired.

MF:

Tiffany jumped up and down when we were listening to the first version of that, she was like “I love that part!” That was a very epic moment in our collaboration.

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The conversation again turns to Margaret Ronda

AR:

[to MR] One of the things that I think is so remarkable about your reading of Wroth's sonnet, apart from your voice, is the clarity you bring to the syntactic complexity of that poem. One of the hard things about that poem simply is the tension between the line endings, and the way in which the words spill over and produce this syntactic emotional overflow—and the two things pull against each other in that poem, which is part of its art. And what I thought was incredible was the way in which you bring that out. I mean the irregular caesura, the tension between the line end and [the] enjambment. I'm curious how intuitive that felt, how much you had to work to get there? Did you decide yourself what those choices were going to be?

MR:

I realized that I couldn't be intuitive. Some poems, you enter them, or you read them out loud, and you can kind of way-find through them. And with this poem, I really had to read it silently a lot, read it to myself, read it out loud, and try to figure out a syntax that felt very bewildering to me—generatively bewildering—and then also try to think about it as a story.

So how do you preserve the complexity of the syntax? And the cognitive complexity of that poem? But also, it's a powerful sexual story. It's about surrendering, and a heart being pulled from the chest, there's so much. It's dreamlike. It's surreal. It's a vision. It's a myth. Or an allegory of love. And so how do you capture that sense of, the kind of narrative force, but also not let that overtake the tricky, complex maneuvering of the syntax?

The Event: Performing the Sonnet Songs

AR: How was the live performance?

MF:

It was a demonstration of the music and they were played as DJ tracks. I mixed into one and out to the other, in the order in which we made them, and the event was great, great

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reaction from the crowd, a really fun event. I think, if we were to do it again, I would much rather do it in a live way, in which Bertrand and Margaret would read. And Tiffany as well, because she's in the background of the one track. So, to do this live, I think, would be more impactful moving forward, but everyone enjoyed it. Everyone had the literature with the sonnets printed out and were reading along with it. So, it was a different setting for me, but it was great just to see the reaction that everyone had to it. There were people who were reading and other people were dancing. I've never seen people reading on the dance floor before.

TW:

It was this incredible gathering, given the atmospheric river weather event. I was actually surprised that we had such a great turn out. We had some senior scholars there as well as a good number of emerging scholars. It was fun to see what Mike is describing, the differences in how people responded to it. And I will say it was interesting for me too, to understand how, in a live venue, how different the sound is, compared to when you listen to a produced version. So, for me, I was like, oh I can't hear the words enough, I want to hear the words! This is me, right? I felt like it was a moment of Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson – like it's a spectacle! No, it's the words! But one of the younger scholars, Sawyer Kemp, who is now at Queen's College in New York, said, "you know what, I came here to dance, I didn't come here necessarily to listen to a sonnet," it was amazing. And then you had others, I think it was probably more the older scholars, who had their flashlights out on their phones, trying to read along. The venue had spaces where you could sit, and then there was also space to dance, so people could do what they felt comfortable doing. And I think seeing the mixed reaction was really exciting in that live setting. Some people dancing, some people sitting trying to read, as Mike was saying, it created a sense that there's different ways of approaching this and still enjoying yourself.

AR:

So, I'm curious, were there any non-academics at this event, or were they just all academics?

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TW:

No, we had a really great showing from our neighborhood community in Oakland.

AR:

That is pretty extraordinary. Bertrand, how was it for you to hear your voice in that space with all these people? Because, I have to confess, I turned it up right before our meeting, in my office, thinking there was nobody here, and somebody knocked on my door to find out what was happening because I had it on full volume here. So yeah, it's kind of amazing, this is what house music does, it's supposed to really penetrate your body and take over the space, there is something very physical about it.

BD:

It was strange, I have to say. It was nice to see especially with some of our neighbors, they were just dancing, saying "oh I love that, I'm loving [it]." And I know they didn't do it to please us, or whatever, somewhere a bit probably, because they're biased. But it was nice to see them dance. Me, I was dancing with my neighbor, it was fun, that's it. I was trying to not listen to my voice too much.

AR:

This sense of being taken over by a poem that is not your poem is a really interesting way to think about house music, right? In which you're taken over by a rhythm and a beat, and a repetition, that in some ways penetrates your body. [To MR] I'm just curious how that felt for you?

MR:

When we were in the club, it was hard to hear the voices the [beats] were so loud and forceful. What gets foregrounded because we were all, for the most part, literary critics and early modern scholars was, "where's the words?" But, then also, you have to give yourself over to this other experience of this other aspect of the sonnet and the song that comes forward. That also has its own propulsive force, and the sonnet is getting woven through. I prioritize in my mind the words and the rhythms of the sonnet, but then it's like, oh, I have to surrender to this other rhythm and the sonic gets backgrounded or

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threaded through this other dominant reality that is the house rhythm and the house beat, and just the intricacies of the song that DJ Mike made. And I think when you listen to the recording, it's balanced.

AR:

Yes, and that's a feature of being in a club in which the DJ is controlling what that balance actually is.

MR:

Yeah, and it's more in the body, obviously. And it reverberates through your body, as beats do in a club. And so that was also very powerful and different from sitting in my living room with my phone and the poem and reading silently and trying to get it right. So, it's these different ways of encountering, and moments of encountering this process.

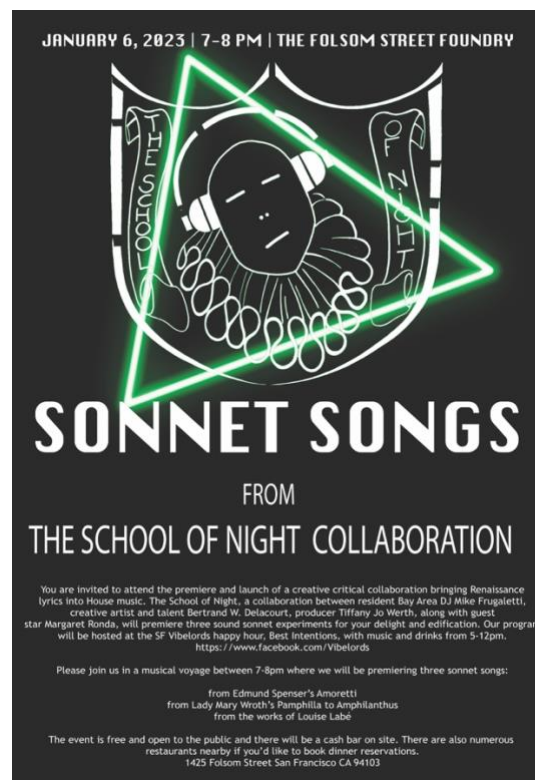


Figure 5: Flyer promotional for Sonnet Songs. Designed by Kirsten Schuhmacher (UC Davis)

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The conversation turns to Sawyer Kemp

AR:

[to SK] What it was like to be at the Sonnet Songs Event in San Francisco?

SK:

I thought this was an awesome event. From the very first email, I was kind of on board, because I love a public facing scholar approach that is actually engaging with a public that is primarily not academics. And I also have to bracket this with the knowledge that I'm not a Spenserian. I've read Spenser, and I've taught the *Faerie Queene*, but it's not, it's just not my jam.

AR:

No caveats, no caveats!

SK:

The event was originally supposed to be part of a larger house music monthly event that goes from something like 5 to midnight, a long program of dancing and DJing. And I was curious to see how it would be folded into that. But because of the weird weather situation, what we actually got was a slice of this experimental approach to the event extracted from the conditions that we would expect it to be in. So, the Performance Studies person in me is like, this is great, in that we isolated a variable, but also, I would like to do it again in a situation where you could have the whole thing.

I think that we all kind of trickled in while the DJ was playing other music, and it just felt like going to a cool bar in a neat event space, that just happened to be full of all of your academic friends. And then, when they started playing the songs, they announced them, and they started playing them, and there was, I think a kind of academic confusion about how to process getting this kind of data. A few people instinctually wanted to dance; I think there was a feeling of wanting to dance when you hear this kind of music, but also you're in a room with many of your academic peers, and it didn't have the rest of the apparatus around it that might have made that easier to do. When you listen to the

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recording of them, you can hear the words I think a lot better. And so, when I listen to them recorded, I can tell, this is kind of a cool appropriation of a Spenser sonnet, or this is a—I don't even know, I feel like you could write a whole paper deciding if it's an appropriation or adaptation, right?

AR:

I was just going to ask you, you used “appropriation,” hm?

SK:

I guess if I were going to make this an object of study, that might be one point of entry. I think an argument that maybe I might make [to that end] about having attended in person would be that hearing it in the space, and hearing it mostly without the words, but knowing that it is, knowing from the academic perspective what the intention of the project was, and that it was Tiffany collaborating with people that she knew in the Bay Area. I think that you could make the case, because the audio trumps the lyric in that moment, it becomes appropriation in that performance space. But maybe the recording is not itself an appropriation yet?

AR:

That's such a performance scholar approach!

The conversation turns to Jeff Dolven

AR:

[to JD] What did it feel like to be in the space and listen to it?

JD:

It felt great. I found myself thinking about the sonnet from *Astrophel and Stella*, “because I oft in dark abstracted guise,/ Seem most alone in greatest company.” Some of that sense of both being together with the group, but also in the dark with this pounding pulse as though we're inside your own breast. It simultaneously felt like the inner exile of the sonnet space, so I was very moved by that. And the way in which particular phrases would

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get obsessively picked up from the text and repeated and repeated also felt true to the ruminative character of the form. At certain places, I mean especially the openings of the sonnets, but also moments in the interior that would echo and reecho. Sonnets are in love with echo, and that felt appropriate.

It was a good space. And people got moving by the end of it, I think. There was some dancing, and certainly some swaying, and bouncing, and bobbing. It was interesting, it was the Louise Labé sonnet that was most read to beat. That [really] kept time. And the English sonnets not so much. Which felt sort of true to the rebellions of the English pentameter at that moment, trying so hard really to free itself from the metronome. So, I liked that. And yeah, just very contagious beats; the DJ is an expert in the idiom, so we were well served by that.

AR:

So let me ask you, some people have said to me that they could barely hear the words, and so it felt that they couldn't hear the words, and they felt that it was disconnected somehow from the poetry. Did you feel that?

JD:

As you know, I have all the sonnets of the period memorized, so I don't really need to... I do probably have the first sonnet from the *Amoretti* memorized, so that one was easy to catch. But I did hear the words—I can't say that I followed the Louise Labé line for line. My French isn't quite up to that, under those circumstances especially. But I heard a fair amount of it, and I was certainly able to get a sense of the way in which the words were disposed to us across the beat, the measures of it. And the relief in which the repeated phrases stood out was also effective. So, it happens to me, reading a lot of poetry, there are certain passages that will recede into a slightly blurry background and others that will stand out and be super sharp and acute. So, there was some sort of reading experience going on there. It was a little demanding on the attention, but I was happy to try to meet the demand.

Reflections: On Crossing Time, Media, Bodies



Figure 6: [Image created by Jeffrey Day \(UC Davis\)](#)

AR:

Many of us, as writers about poetry or lovers of poetry understand the rhythm on the page or in our heads, but that does not necessarily mean that it translates into being able to enact that rhythm in your body. Tiffany how do you understand your desire to do this collaboration, which is all about bringing the page, the body, and the music together, to be thinking actively about that question? Because, in some ways, we're so dissociated from the places where we feel rhythm in our body--the club, dancing—and then we situate these poems in a different place, as though the two things are not related, right?

TW:

For me, the genesis of this was listening to the Donne sonnet set to opera. I'm always trying to, especially with the *Holy Sonnets* of Donne, trying to portray to a student body, who oftentimes doesn't have the same religious sensibilities, the extreme agony and emotion that's in that sonnet. And I think the opera setting does it just so beautifully, makes it huge. And so, I think, one of the things that I was trying to do here, is what are the ways that we can show in a different medium, one that students might understand more, some of the emotional registers that these sonnets are playing with. That they're not just this exercise in academic understanding, but that there is this whole really rich emotional underlay to it. I have a lot of students who enjoy house music and I felt like this would be a medium that might be a way of translating what I feel is some of the emotional

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intensity of these sonnets to a student body.

AR: The other question I had actually is a small one, which is about voices. The Labé poem is partly subversive because it's a woman speaking it, but we get Bertrand's male voice. And for me, as somebody who has taught that poem and read it many times, it was so weird to hear a man reading it, because in my head it's sort of Margaret's voice. And Margaret's voice, weirdly enough, because it's so female, made me realize that my own internal sense of that voice was not that timbre. So, I'm just curious if in this collaboration you were thinking about features of voice in a more concrete way than when we talk about it abstractly. When you hear it layered over music the quality of the resonance of the voice itself is amplified, never mind what it's actually saying. I'm curious if you have thoughts about that, or how intentional some of that was?

TW:

I actually like the disjunction. I love the fact that you have a French accent, overlaying the Anglo and English in the Spenser sonnet. I liked the sort of awkwardness, the intonations. I thought it lent it a whole different soundscape. But there's a mismatch, right? What's strange I think is that, for the Wroth sonnet, in some ways Margaret's voice is so perfect, there is no mismatch. It's kind of seamless. But then with the Labé, again, we're doing a sort of cross-gendered verse in some ways, voicing it in a masculine voice, but again I liked that mismatch, I liked the rough edges of bringing together things that just aren't quite fitting. Because I feel like the whole project was about different kinds of translation and transformation. Bringing sonnets, their rhythm into a modern house beat. Thinking across boundaries of gender, thinking across boundaries of nationalities. And also producing these sonnets 400–500 years later in a radically different part of the world, in a very intimate domestic space of someone's closet was also really resonant.

AR:

That's wonderful. One of the things I kept thinking about listening to Bertrand's voice with the Labé was, the scandal of who Labé might have been: was Labé actually a woman, or was she in fact written by this coterie of male poets? So, this question of what's at stake in that gender identification is also lovely. Because of the disco beat, there is something

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about the fluidity that actually amplifies what's at stake.

The conversation turns to Margaret Ronda

[To MR] I wonder if I can just ask you to reflect too as a poet. We talk so much in poetry about voice, but we rarely mean the voice, or a specific voice, or an embodied voice. Right? We mean something more abstract.

MR:

I think that the distance that I already felt, the useful distance, generative distance, from the Wroth sonnet, made it a different kind of experience for me-- reading it out loud, and seeing it go through these different orientations or re-makings. Then, I think about my own writing, or my voice in my own poems, which also is a play with distance, proximity, and reorientation, with distancing and mediation, but always with something that feels like it will connect with an other. So, I'm thinking about my voice, or my perceptions, or the kind of world I make in my mind with my words, and then how that will connect to others; the voice is this medium for making that exchange, making that connection. When I was reading the Wroth sonnet, I was thinking about intimacy and proximity and distance, because the voice is so powerful. It's so authoritative and strange and uncanny. And it comes to you, and I felt like I'm sort of the medium or something, and I'm just carrying it forward or it's entering me somehow. It's like something has entered me, and I have to give it voice and bring it out to others.

AR:

What I'm hearing as you talk about this, Margaret, is that you bring to it your sensibility as a contemporary poet who's thinking with past or wrestling with a past model as a trans-temporal peer. And so I'm curious, wearing your poet hat, how it felt to encounter Wroth, and then be part of a project to translate Wroth back into a contemporary performance idiom.

MR:

I don't know that I was thinking about my own inheritances, either as a scholar or a poet

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per se, though of course I'm bringing my own sensibilities and maybe obsessions in poetry to the poem, but at some unconscious level. But I think that what I felt my charge was, was to be a performer. And so, first and foremost, to bring a purity of poetic energy to it.

AR:

But can you really separate that from yourself as a poet?

MR:

I don't know! I don't know! I'm thinking out loud obviously, maybe the way that it connects to myself as a poet is that, often when I enter the space of a poem it is Keatsian, "I have to not know. I have to be in a mystery, and I have to let something arise." I can't [bring] the deductive, interpretive, logical, analytical mind, all the things that I know. Obviously they're there, but I can't let that overdetermine what's going to happen in this moment of encounter with the page. And so, I think there was something of that, maybe, in this assignment, this great task. Though, again, obviously bringing something forward from the past into the present and trying to make it feel alive and contemporary [is a challenge]. And I was thinking, "well, this is going to be in relationship to a house beat." I think I was also thinking, "how can it have some kind of sensibility that feels like it would make sense in a club environment?" So, I think that sense of consciously moving into a certain kind of unconscious-like being in the mystery of what arises was probably at work.

TW:

One of the things that I felt was different about your reading, Margaret, was that you did not share the embodied difference [from the poet] in the same way as Bertrand entering into a Labé poem had, or entering into a language that's not a native language. But hearing you speak, you've reminded me of the temporal distance, which is equally important in this project of carrying across.

The conversation turns to Sawyer Kemp

AR:

To follow up on your earlier comment, Sawyer, we need to take this to the SAA, and

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actually do a whole set. That would be such an interesting venue to do the same thing.

SK:

I'm working on a project right now that is about an early modern seemingly historical person, who was an intersex person who sold aniseed water and pops up in a bunch of weird places that you wouldn't expect, in different literary tracks and periodicals from the mid-1600s. And one of the places where they pop up are songs. There's a couple of different songs and dances associated with this character, and I've been trying to think about a trans studies approach to the music legacy of this person. And because when I listened to one of the songs I was—I wanted it to be a banger, but it just wasn't, it just wasn't there. It's just kind of slow. And so, I've been thinking, because of Tiffany's project, about, what would it mean to reproduce that in a space, if you think of the dance club as being kind of a queer space, right? What would it mean to appropriate that poetry—because there is poetry associated with this character and the songs—and kind of remake them in a space that was designed for some other ends?

AR:

Right, queer performance in a more trans-temporally ample way.

SK:

It's tough with performance, because there's the element of wanting to reproduce the historical conditions of performance, and to say, what was it like for audiences to experience this? But this is a disappearing horizon that we can never quite accumulate.

AR:

This kind of effort, particularly as you describe it, which is dancing in the space with people looking at you, where in some ways the words disappear—I wonder what does it feels like to be inside the experiment, as opposed to commenting on the experiment?

SK:

That's a good point, I don't think I thought of it at that time, but when you put it to me that way, I think that's exactly right, and that there's something about the—it's different

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to be the recipient, right, to be audiencing something.

AR:

It sounds like there was a kind of performance piece quality to this—just 15-20 minutes—and then you were all having to comment on what you just experienced together. Was that weird?

SK:

It was a little weird, Like I said, this was the specifics of this event. There was a major storm going on, and they had just canceled their major DJ party. So, it was just these songs, and I think I remember Tiffany going around being like, “can you tell which sonnet this was?” and all of us kind of going like “no, we can't.” But that doesn't mean that it wasn't a good song. In fact, that's not something that we are even looking for a lot of the time when we're at a bar trying to dance. If you think about how we experience dance music, and dance clubs. They're not places that we go to have a primarily language experience. The unboundedness of this particular music genre is interesting to play with because sonnets are specifically formally bounded, right?

The conversation again turns to Jeff Dolven

AR:

[to JD] You've done a lot of experimenting with poetry and music, and different kinds of music, sound, and poems. As someone who's thought about this both intellectually and as a poet, I'm curious what you made of the marriage of house music looping with sonnets.

JD:

I think there is a mode, both of text setting and a complimentary mode of criticism that is very engaged with the metaphorical potentials of each medium with respect to the other. Especially the ways in which different musical figurations might activate, emphasize, ironize particular figures of speech. And when I think of my own dissertation advisor John Hollander, that's what he loved to do. He had such a command of music theory, comparable to his command of metrical theory. And so, he was able to be equally technical

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in both domains and speak to the complicated figurations that arose. This was much more a question of juxtaposed atmospherics—how Gothic are these sonnets?

They felt like sonnets that were being ruminated on, as much as they were being interpreted. Someone whose relationship to them was somewhat obsessive, sticking on certain phrases and calling them out, calling them up. And that's just another relation of words and music, and it's less susceptible to technical description, that is, it wouldn't avail as much to try and go in there and line up particular moments to beat and in the sonnets. But it still can capture and also guide an experience of reading, and possibly an experience of writing, that is, what sort of dark impulsive mood are you in, when [you might] say things like those sonnets say.

AR:

Is this kind of experiment something that you think you might like to try with other kinds of music and poetry, or with your own poems?

JD:

Well, I have had the experience of having people set poems of mine, and probably in both of those registers. My friend Dmitri Tymoczko, who is a composer here at Princeton, set some sonnets that I wrote on the model of the—not sonnets, but little fragmentary poems—on the model of the medieval *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*. And he writes extremely intricate music that was intricately responsive to what the text was saying. That was really exciting to hear and to think about setting as interpretation. I have a new book of poems and my friend Majel Connory and her bandmate Matt Walsh, they set a few of those poems, and there are one or two of them that really track the full poem, and others in which she's just chosen a few strings of words that she's interested in. And in some sense it's an interpretation of what's at the heart of this poem and what's its mood. I get that reading from what she's done. And sometimes it's really just letting the music adjust my emotional relationship to the text that I wrote.

AR:

Do you feel dissociated from your own poem when someone takes it and does something

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so radically reinterpetative in a totally different medium? Or do you feel like it reorients your own sense of what the poem is that you wrote?

JD:

Much more the latter. I think, at moments Majel was anxious about what she was doing to the poems, messing with what must be for me a kind of sacredly arranged object. But that wasn't my feeling about hearing them. I was always just delighted to have them come back to me in such a strange way. And some of the music is just wonderful. And now I hear it when I go back to those poems.

AR:

A lot of this experimentation and what you're describing with your own poems reminds me of playfulness in writing poetry. There is a way in which we, as scholars of early modern poetry, lose that because we treat these as great art and objects that are somewhat ossified in their canonical value. What happens when that's displaced back into this space of play? And ultimately are some of these experimentations about reminding us as readers, as scholars, as teachers, that poetry often emerges from play? And from social reorientations of this kind?

JD:

Yeah, I think that's very much the case. And there's a way in which, working across idioms, working across media, working across senses, encourages playfulness—that the serious activities of paraphrase or analysis are a little bit disabled when you're trying to think musically. And so, what is there to do, but play? It lets you think about mood in a different way, about feeling, it brings the question of feeling forward more, in a way that can sometimes get lost when we're in our drier passages of exegesis.

But it's a wonderful experiment. It's a wonderful way to spend an evening. And that challenge—just the cognitive challenge that's posed by any act of analogy—was active in that room. We just had to think those things together, and it turned out for me that a lot happened when I did think, and feel, and dance to the sonnet and the house music together.

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AR:

I have a one final question for The School of Night: what's next for you?

TW:

As for what's next: we began with this European repertoire, with sonnets, but we are thinking of doing more experiments into other iconic nonwestern forms of lyric. Send us suggestions! You can also follow us on [Instagram](#)