Old-School
Season 1, Episode 6
Latitudes

Chi: My mom and baby sister are members of a collective called the Bioneers that maintains that our current environmental plight is one awful manifestation of a crisis in human consciousness. You might recognize their slogan from pins and bumper stickers: "It's all connected." My poetry version of that slogan is: *We're* all connected. Which is NOT the same thing as saying we're all the same! It's saying that we have deeply meaningful cultural common ground on which to build and draw when we talk about even the things that divide us.

Chad: African American authors use shared symbols and myths and images to make themselves heard by one another, and legible to each other, and to their diverse readers.

Chi: Maybe to change our minds about who and what the enemy is…and who and when and what to fight, and when to put the weapons down, and what to assemble and think about long after the battle.

Chad: Also, how to think about a battle's long reverberations, starting with their reverb in a single human life. A single African American veteran's life, perhaps…

[theme song: "Who Dat" by Amber Spill]

Chi: Welcome to Old-School, a podcast about African American studies and the classics. I'm your host, Chiyuma Elliott.

Chad: And I'm your other host, Chad Hegelmeyer. Today's show is all about Pulitzer Prize winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa's war poetry.

Chi: African American literature has a rich tradition of both using and discarding the classics. Komunyakaa is one of those poets who uses the classics. Frequently! And he's especially partial to ancient Greek epic poems by Homer.

Chad: Today, we're going to talk about Homeric references in his 2008 book *Warhorses* and his 2015 book *The Emperor of Water Clocks*.

Chi: And I'm probably going to declare Komunyakaa the Emperor of American war poetry. Because he's revolutionized the way poets write about military conflict. It will be all kinds of Old-School fun, folks! So stick around…

Chi: Okay, confession time. I skimmed over Yusef Komunyakaa's 2012 poem called "Latitudes" when I read it the first time. But then I met that same poem again, years later, on the Poetry Foundation's website, and it *blew* my mind. So, if you're fashionably late to the "Latitudes" party, you're in good company. "Latitudes" is a subtle poem. It uses multiple Homeric allusions to talk about the long aftermath of war.

Chad: The Vietnam War—and its racial and sexual politics—is one of Komunyakaa's recurring subjects. He served in the United States Army from 1969 to 1970 and was a correspondent, and then a managing editor, for the *Southern Cross* military journal during the war. He also earned a Bronze Star for his journalism. (And it was dangerous work; Ken Burns's Vietnam War documentary noted that over 200 journalists died in Vietnam).

Chi: Komunyakaa began writing poetry in 1973 (three years after he got back from the war). But he didn't start writing about the war until 14 years after he came home. "Latitudes" is written from the perspective of a veteran; it's a re-telling of the story of the homecoming of Odysseus (aka Ulysses).

Chad: Even though we need to understand at least three Homeric references to make full sense of the poem's action and its emotional implications, we're going to put it into the air first and *then* talk about how its allusions work.

Chi: We've already given a spoiler about the first allusion: to the ancient Greek character Odysseus. Though the poem's speaker uses the Roman version of the name: Ulysses. For those of you who are already familiar with Homer's poetry, see if you can find the other two classical allusions in "Latitudes."

Chad: Here's Komunyakaa himself reading the poem:

> "Latitudes"
>
> If I'm not Ulysses, I am
> his dear, ruthless half-brother.
> Strap me to the mast
> so I may endure night sirens
> singing my birth when water

broke into a thousand blossoms
in a landlocked town of the South,
before my name was heard
in the womb-shaped world
of deep sonorous waters.
Storms ran my ship to the brink,
& I wasn't myself in a kingdom
of unnamed animals & totem trees,
but never wished to unsay my vows.
From the salt-crusted timbers
I could only raise a battering ram
or cross, where I learned God
is rhythm & spores. If I am
Ulysses, made of his words
& deeds, I swam with sea cows
& mermaids in a lost season,
ate oysters & poison-berries
to approach the idea of death
tangled in the lifeline's slack
on that rolling barrel of a ship,
then come home to more than just
the smell of apples, the heavy oars
creaking the same music as our bed.

[Source: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58750/latitudes (2015)]

Chad: One of the first things to say about Komunyakaa's poem is that the story it retells is of the aftermath of war. Not the battles of the *Iliad*, but the long wanderings and difficult homecoming of the *Odyssey*. We get the first decisive hint of this with his opening salvo about the speaker's name.

Chi: Then the first thing Komunyakaa's speaker requests or commands is "Strap me to the mast/so I may endure night sirens/singing my birth." Those words plunge us readers into one of the most dramatic instances during the ten years of wandering…years when Odysseus is thwarted repeatedly in his attempts to return home from the battles at Troy.

Chad: In Homer's poem, Odysseus wants to hear the voice of the sirens, those dangerous creatures who lure sailors to their deaths by enchanted singing. Songs which make crews go mad and jump into the water and drown.

Chi: Or steer their vessels to shipwreck in rock-filled waters.

Chad: In Homer's long poem, Odysseus commands his crew to stop their own ears up with wax, and then tie him to the mast of the ship. And the deal is they agree not to untie him until they're safe, and they've sailed far out of earshot of the sirens.

Chi: So the command at the beginning of Yusef Komunyakaa's poem recalls that brash defiance, and that courting of danger, and that desire for experience. What a way to begin! We get this weirdness about who he is exactly (Ulysses or his half-brother), and then he's saying "strap me to the mast."

Chad: In that instance with the sirens, curiosity worked out fine for the original Odysseus. But he wasn't always so lucky.

["Allegro" by TAGE]

Chi: Also, there's an oblique hint of past marital infidelity when Komunyakaa's speaker asserts, "I wasn't myself…but never wished to unsay my vows," maybe alluding to the seven years Homer's hero spent captured, detained, and enchanted by the songs of Calypso before he broke the nymph's spell—motivated finally by how much he missed his wife, Penelope, and assisted by the intervention of his patron, the goddess Athena.

Chad: At the end of Komunyakaa's poem, the music is not that of nymphs or sirens. It's not even the music of voices; it's the creaking sound the bed makes during sex between the long-separated husband and wife. The speaker's final reflection or observation is that the sound of the bed is "the same music" as that made by the heavy oars of his ship.

Chi: Even the act of homecoming and intimate marital connection evokes wandering.

Chad: Is that a good or a bad thing? Maybe it depends on what we think of the poem's speaker.

Chad: Also, it's not just any bed making the sounds! In the *Odyssey*, it's linked to the final, private test that enables Penelope to recognize her husband after 20 years apart (ten he spent fighting at Troy and ten he spent on his long journey home to Ithaca). The secret Penelope keeps from everyone is the fact that their bed—hidden from view in a locked room—is made from a living olive tree.

Chi: In Homer's poem, she makes a casual comment about moving the bed, pretending that it's just an ordinary piece of furniture. In other words, she's testing him, right? And then Odysseus tells her such a feat would be impossible.

Chad: This is how Penelope recognizes her husband after 20 years apart. In Komunyakaa's poem, the allusion to a rooted, living bed gives us readers a sense of the passion of the couple's long-awaited and fraught sexual reunion, and also of what's at stake: mutual recognition.

Chi: The poet Stephen Dobyns maintains that the ending of a successful poem surprises us because it catapults us back to its beginning and makes us rethink the whole poem—and find a unity that we didn't perceive initially. At the end of Komunyakaa's poem, because of the allusion to Penelope's key role in Odysseus's homecoming, we realize that the speaker is talking to his long-estranged wife.

Chad: We realize that he's been talking to her all along. And that this whole poem is about the tangle of marital foreplay and sex—and it's also about the intensely complicated histories and personal baggage and nuanced recognitions of self and other that a couple brings to those acts.

Chi: Chad, let's jump back to the beginning of the poem for a minute. What do you make of the fact that the siren's song at the beginning of the poem is a metaphor for childbirth (its sounds and its broken waters)?

> when water
> broke into a thousand blossoms
> in a landlocked town of the South,
> before my name was heard
> in the womb-shaped world
> of deep sonorous waters.

Chad: Yeah, that's a lot of womb imagery! Um…

Chi: Yeah! [laughing]

Chad: Some of this seems autobiographical maybe, since Komunyakaa himself was born in a "landlocked town of the South": Bogolusa, Louisiana. But not the limited kind of personal storytelling, because I think the point is to connect the universal, dangerous song of childbirth and the "deep sonorous waters" waters of the womb-shaped world.

The poem connects human gestation and the shape of the world; there's this deep, natural, watery, elemental, maybe almost mystical congruence.

Chi: Yeah, this isn't a poem that splits sex and reproduction; they're all part of the mix. And part of the desire for experience that the poem suggests is universal.

Chad: Yeah, I think the Homeric references in the poem are doing really heavy lifting! Because those references are helping us readers understand a big claim of the poem. Which is that the experiences that so many of us just consider normal (like childbirth) are connected to the greatest and most dangerous of human adventures. They are mythic; they are what heroes face. And they are also what the great poets wrote and still write about.

["TKO" by BLUE STEEL]

Chi: We've been focusing on classical allusions in this poem, but so far we've left out one of the key things that's linked to them: the *if*. The if is an aspect of this poem that I find magical and utterly captivating. (It had me at hello once I read this poem carefully.) In the opening lines of Komunyakaa's poem, the speaker declares: "If I'm not Ulysses, I am / his dear, ruthless half-brother." What?!! Right? Instant mystery!

Chad: Yeah, we readers begin this poem wrongfooted and uncertain and wondering, which makes incredible emotional sense in a poem about wandering, homecoming, and re-establishing intimacy.

Chi: In her literary craft book called *The Art of Intimacy*, Stacey D'Erasmo says the following about the subjunctive's capacity for doubling in poetry and fiction:

> *If I saw you. If we met. If I had gone through that door. If I had found you. If you were here.* The *if* is a wonderful device because it simultaneously alerts the reader that what is to follow did not happen and allows the reader to engage in the narrative as if it were happening. As a grammar, it's an optical illusion that is also potentially quite a powerful tool for summoning up desire and loss simultaneously and causing the reader to experience both states with equal force.

Chad: That's such a cool quote!

Chi: Isn't that the best flipping quote ever?! I throw that at creative writing students, I throw that at advanced poetry students. And I'm just like, "we're gonna rock the if, we're going to think about this if."

Chad: I…I love making my students think about verbal moods in poetry, it's like the smartest thing in the world.

Chi: How do we decide which kind of speaker this is? Maybe the "if" tells us that we have to toggle! To be prepared to see more than one thing simultaneously.

Chad: "Latitudes" could be a persona poem written from Ulysses/Odysseus's perspective…*or* it could be a regular first-person poem about a speaker who is very *like* Odysseus (and is reflecting on the similarities). Someone who is dear and ruthless.

Chad: In the opinion of literary critic Kirkland C. Jones,

> "Komunyakaa's Vietnam poems rank with the best on that subject. He focuses on the mental horrors of war—the anguish shared by the soldiers, those left at home to keep watch, and other observers, participants, objectors, who are all part of the 'psychological terrain.'"

Komunyakaa's war poems are also celebrated and noteworthy because they explore issues of race and sex, often unflinchingly.

Chi: I'm going to propose an additional "if" now: what if we read "Latitudes" as a Vietnam war poem? Even though the poem never mentions or alludes to that particular military conflict? What if we thought about the story it tells as the story of the difficult return of a flawed warrior?

Chad: Which means it's also a story about what intimacy looks like and feels like if you are the loyal and long-suffering *wife* of such a soldier! In addition to being a poem about identity and trying to figure out who you are (as the speaker declares, "I wasn't myself").

Chi: And a poem about time passing, right? And about the struggles in a life, and about sex and intimacy (the sound of the bed moving is the "same music" as the oars rowing a heavy warship).

Chad: And a poem about memory and coming to terms with the past. Multiple themes and multiple stories are happening at once, enabled by the *if* and the poem's allusions.

Chi: This is not the first time Komunyakaa has taken up this part of Odysseus and Penelope's story. In his 2008 book *Warhorses*, he has an untitled poem that goes like this:

> ["7even" by Aiolos Rue]
>
> Here, the old masters of Shock & Awe
> huddle in the war room, talking iron,
> fire & sand, alloy & nomenclature.
> Their hearts lag against the bowstring
> as they dream of Odysseus's bed.
> But to shoot an arrow through the bull's eye
> of twelve axes lined up in a row
> is to sleep with one's eyes open. Yes,
>
> of course, there stands lovely Penelope
> like a trophy, still holding the brass key
> against her breast. How did the evening star
> fall into that room? Lost between plot
> & loot, the plucked string turns into a lyre
> humming praises & curses to the unborn.
>
> [source: *Warhorses*, 5]

Chad: This earlier Komunyakaa poem is about the homecoming tests in Homer's Odyssey. Specifically, the archery competition where Odysseus defeats the mob of unwanted, lay-about suitors who are courting his wife because they think she's a rich widow and they want to get their hands on her money.

Chi: They are so disreputable. [Chad laughs] And maybe the bowstring from that archery competition in the first stanza gets plucked in the last stanza and turns into a lyre. In other words, into the poem's fraught music?

Chad: I think the big question Komunyakaa keeps asking—in this poem, and implicitly in "Latitudes"— is about the mystery of it all: "How did the evening star / fall into that room?"

Chi: I love that line so much!

Chad: It's great…

["That Flavour" by Chronillogical]

Chi: Komunyakaa's ability to ask big, important questions in subtle and relatable ways is part of why he's revolutionized the way American poets write war poetry. His poems are glorious, but they don't glorify fighting and bloodshed like Homer sometimes did.

Chad: And they're not these formal memorial poems or formal battle cries. Like those written by Wilfred Owen, John McCrae, Allen Tate and other popular Anglophone poets of the World War I and World War II generations.

Chi: Allen Tate's 1928 poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead" is set after a war, like Komunyakaa's "Latitudes." And it has water imagery. But it's so different! Here's part of a stanza from the second half of Tate's poem:

> Now that the salt of their blood
> Stiffens the saltier oblivion of the sea,
> Seals the malignant purity of the flood,
> What shall we who count our days and bow
> Our heads with a commemorial woe
> In the ribboned coats of grim felicity,
> What shall we say of the bones, unclean,
> Whose verdurous anonymity will grow?

Chad: That's a bonkers word! Yeah, I can't see Komunyakaa using the phrase "verdurous anonymity."

Chi: Yeah, probably not! Um, Komunyakaa shows up on the scene and just breaks open so many war poem conventions! About formality certainly. And other things as well. Komunyakaa's poetic speakers are soldiers and veterans, and they talk to their loved ones, or to themselves. Often, they talk about the voices and the images from the war that they can't get out of their heads.

Chad: Now I'm thinking about his early poem called "Report from the Skull's Diorama."

Chi: Exactly! A lot of these war poems are about the mind, and the inside of a mind. What it feels like to have a mind that's troubled by war, or that's wounded by war.

["Freeform" by Rannar Sillard?]

Chad: Yusef Komunyakaa doesn't shy away from writing about difficult and painful things! But those difficult poems are empowering, too. In part because they show how human beings can transform suffering into something that connects people. For example, into poems that tell veterans and their families that they are not alone.

Chi: And poems that talk about love's complexities. And that show how contemporary African American writers keep good company with the classics!

Chad: Komunyakaa is one of the contemporary Black writers who sits with Shakespeare and Homer, to riff on W. E. B. Du Bois's phrasing.

Chi: A bunch of years ago, I was in a creative writing workshop with Hugh Martin, a poet who's published three books about his deployments during the Iraq War. Hugh told me that, when he gets stuck trying to write about wartime and postwar experiences, he uses Yusef Komunyakaa's poems like playbooks. To figure out how to tell those difficult stories about what war and its aftermath feels like to the combatants.

Chad: So, in addition to winning a bunch of important poetry awards, and being beloved by so many readers, Komunyakaa is also a model and an inspiration to new generations of writers.

Chi: Yes! He's certainly one of my poetry heroes.

Chad: I think it's great that your poetry hero writes about flawed heroes!

Chi: Yeah, because the perfect heroes are boring! Bring on the human messiness and complexity! And the empathy and the generosity.

Chad: This feels like the perfect way to wrap up this first season of Old-School…

Chi: We'll be back next season, with a *whole new* spate of shows about African American Studies and the classics.

Chad: This season was a mini-survey of Black classical engagements from 1773 to the present. Kind of a whirlwind tour!

Chi: Next season, we do a deep dive into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Our theme for next year is "The Backdrop of the Recent Past."

Chad: We'll talk about the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s, and how it shapes the way many of us think about African American literature and the classics. And how we make judgements about what's Black and what isn't.

Chi: And we'll look back at how the generations of artists immediately before that used the classics to explore those same questions about the best ways to be a Black writer. As Countée Cullen wrote back in 1925, "Yet I do marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!"

Chad: We're going to talk about Countée Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, and Haki Madhubuti.

Chi: And Ralph Ellison and Gloria Naylor. And June Jordan and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon! It's going to be all kinds of Old-School fun. And we hope you'll join us…

["Who Dat" by Amber Spill]

Chad: Thanks for listening to Old-School! The Old-School podcast is brought to you by the Berkeley Institute and the Department of African American Studies at UC Berkeley. The podcast is funded by gifts from Boyd and Jill Smith and the Foundation for Excellence in Higher Education.

Chi: Thanks to Amber Spill for our theme music. And to Poesis Creative for designing all of our graphics. And to the National Humanities Center and the Digital Humanities Center at San Diego State for helping me learn how to podcast!

Chad: Thanks to the Poetry Foundation for showcasing their vast repository of poems for free, online. Including a bunch by Komunyakaa. The world is a better place because of the poems they share! And my personal thank you to the Port Jefferson Free Library for letting me record Old-School podcasts in one of their quiet conference rooms.

Chi: Check out our show notes if you want some bonus content and Old-School reading recommendations. You can find it at the African American Intellectual Traditions website: aaiti.berkeley.edu.

Chad: Finally, last but not least! Thank you, listeners: you are the best and we appreciate you so much. Thanks for spending your time with us.

Chi: See you next spring, with Season Two of Old-School! Bye for now.