

# James Merrill

## JAMES MERRILL HOUSE NEWSLETTER

Fall 2017

### James Merrill House Celebrated as a National Landmark

**A HAPPY THROG** of community leaders, elected officials, friends and well-wishers gathered in front of 107 Water Street on June 4th to formally applaud Merrill House's designation as a National Historic Landmark. Merrill House Committee Member Geoffrey Little conceived and organized the *plein air* ceremony to coincide with the Merrill Apartment's Spring Open House, as well as a reading that evening by Invited Fellow Louise Glück. (This marathon of Merrill-related events was gleefully dubbed "Super Sunday" by the JMHC.)

First Selectman Rob Simmons kicked off the unveiling of the designation plaque (or its temporary facsimile, soon to be replaced by bronze) by sharing his personal remembrance of Merrill, from the summers he spent in Stonington as a boy. "I knew he also lived in New York, Greece and Key West but this was his *home*. This is where he wrote some of his greatest poems." State Architectural Historian Merena Wisniewski, who prior to the ceremony stopped at the Merrill Apartment Open House to say hello to the volunteer docents, affirmed the building's importance as a research site for LGBTQ historians. Assistant Secretary of State Scott Bates introduced his boss, Denise Merrill ("Not a relative," she quipped) who read the official proclamation congratulating SVIA and the Merrill House Committee for preserving the



Speakers Wisniewski, Hammer, Bates, Merrill, and Simmons with Amy Merrill and co-chairs Sally Wood and Bill Middleton

first and only historic landmark in Connecticut tied to a late-20th-century writer.

Also in attendance were James Merrill's niece, Amy Merrill ("I'm walking on air"), and Merrill biographer and Yale professor Langdon Hammer—whose remarks drew attention to Merrill's reason for choosing Stonington in the first place. "Remember, the U.S. was in the grips of the Lavender Scare. Homosexuals [were] subject to arrest, blackmail, shame, and beatings. When they first moved to Stonington, Merrill

and [his partner David Jackson] pretended they were roommates. Meanwhile, they lived just as they liked high above the street, largely out of sight," Hammer said, noting how the apartment itself is a time capsule of an era when gay life in the U.S. was hidden "but also vibrant, daring, and creative, an adventure." Although public recognition of that life and its historical significance would "astonish" the two men, Hammer believes Merrill—always allergic to civic pomp—would be "gratified *and* amused" by the honor.

Hammer heaped praise on residents from the community who carried Merrill's legacy forward: "Besides the historic changes in the position of gay people in American society and the poetic career Merrill created on this spot, we are only here today because people in this town worked together over a long period to preserve Merrill's house and to create a vision of how it might be [used] to serve art and this community, and ultimately to do all the difficult daily work to make that vision real." Hammer reminded the crowd that when Merrill bequeathed 107 Water Street, "the old eyesore," as he called it, to the Stonington Village Improvement Association, a gift that came with precious little money to support it, some people wondered whether it was a practical joke: "Merrill couldn't have foreseen volunteers in their way just as patient, dogged, and dedicated as he was when he went to his desk every morning. No one could have predicted that."

### American Original: Louise Glück at La Grua



Invited Merrill Fellow  
Louise Glück

**LOUISE GLÜCK PAID A VISIT** to Stonington in early June as the fourth annual Invited Merrill Fellow. The former U.S. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer prizewinner had just put out her new essay collection *American Originality* (Farrar Straus & Giroux). Glück drew a standing room crowd when she read at La Grua Center, where she was introduced by her Yale colleague Langdon Hammer. He recalled that when Glück received the National Humanities Medal in 2015, President Barack Obama had taken her aside to compliment her—on her sneakers. Hammer in turn complimented Glück on her work's "combination of chic and cheek...made out of common language, finding drama in understatement, *measured* in all senses, but capable also of an exhilarating lyricism, as she pushes that style

to take on the great themes of literary tradition: time, art, love, community, the seasons, memory, family, death." He noted that Glück has been a committed teacher of undergraduates, at Williams (where 2017 Merrill Lecturer Claudia Rankine was a student), Stanford, Boston University, and since 2003 at Yale. "As a mentor and friend to young poets, not to mention a model of integrity and seriousness, she has given as much to American poetry as anyone alive today."

# Historic New England Recognizes Merrill House

## THE JAMES MERRILL HOUSE

has received a \$1,000 grant from Historic New England's Community Preservation program, which awards funding for institutions and projects in the New England states with exceptional importance to their local communities. The Merrill House was the only awardee in Connecticut. This grant will support the James Merrill House Committee's effort to inventory, organize, and make Merrill's artwork, books and objects accessible to scholars and others interested in understanding more about Merrill's inspiration for his work.



Where once there was no transom and only gloomy artificial light, Merrill House Fellows now benefit from direct sunlight and a skyline prospect from the Jackson apartment kitchen since a window was installed there in August. Merrill's nephew Mark Magowan donated Merrill's childhood chair to the Merrill House. The seat, needlepointed by Merrill's mother, Hellen Ingram Merrill Plummer, includes his nickname ("Jimmy") and year of birth, as well as a depiction of his Irish Setter and his astrological sign, Pisces.

## Preserving Merrill's Collections

**LAST MAY**, the James Merrill House was awarded a \$10,000 partnership grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation and the 1772 Foundation, to repair or replace leaking, single-pane windows in the Merrill Apartment, including making them UV-shielded. Grant funds are being matched with funding from the Hellen I. Plummer Foundation in 2016.

With new or improved windows in place, we can adequately control the interior temperature and relative humidity in the Merrill apartment and reduce the risk of UV damage to the textiles, artwork, and other furnishings. The project is part of a multi-year effort to conserve the building structure and collections, and to expand public access to the Merrill House and enhance Merrill's legacy. The goal is to make the James Merrill House the premier writers' residency program in New England, while ensuring the long-term preservation of this National Historic Landmark.

Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation ([www.cctrust.org](http://www.cctrust.org)) and the 1772 Foundation have offered partnership grants since 2013. These grants support exterior painting and finish restoration; security and fire protection; repairs to and restoration of windows and porches; structural foundation repairs; and chimney and masonry repointing.

## Alleyway an Eyesore No More

**AT THE URGING** of a concerned donor after the installation of a necessary but unsightly emergency generator, the MH Committee decided to improve the street view of 107 Water by adding a screen just inside the sidewalk. The screen needed to be visually attractive while serving multiple purposes, namely: access for tenants, heating contractors, and mail delivery. A local architect donated his time to prepare sketches. Neighbors and tenants were consulted, approval and building permits were issued, and inspections followed during various phases of construction. The result, which will weather to match the building, screens the generator and adjacent trash bins while providing tenant and emergency access—drawing compliments from casual passers-by. A big thank you to Bill Rutherford and Sibby Lynch, who initiated the project, and to all who followed through to make it happen.



### James Merrill House Committee

#### Co-Chairs

Bill Middleton  
Sally Wood

#### Dee Aldrich

Randy Bean  
Betsy B. Carr  
Penny Duckham  
Cynthia Elliott  
Sarah Dove

#### Jack Fix

Charlie Hatton  
Susan Lindberg  
Geoffrey Little  
Sibby Lynch  
Laura Mathews  
Geoffrey Phillips  
Kate Rushin  
William Rutherford  
Ruth Saunders

#### Immediate Past Chair & Merrill Committee

#### Advisor

Lynn Callahan

#### James Merrill House

#### Advisory Committee

Larry Berger  
Rachel Carley  
Nicholas Delbanco  
Deborah Garrison  
Daniel Hall  
Langdon Hammer  
Joseph Loewenstein  
Robin Magowan  
J. D. McClatchy  
Paul Merrill  
Paul Miller  
Lorrie Moore  
Ivy Pochoda  
Bruce Snider  
Stephen Yenser

107 Water Street, Stonington, CT 06378

[www.JamesMerrillHouse.org](http://www.JamesMerrillHouse.org)

A program of the SVIA

# Claudia Rankine Exposes “The Racial Imaginary”

**ON SEPTEMBER 23**, Claudia Rankine, *The New York Times* bestselling poet and National Book Critics Circle Award winner,



Claudia Rankine reading at La Grua Center

delivered this year’s Merrill Lecture to a packed house at La Grua Center, interspersing her remarks with slides of the arresting photography that appears in her work. Jonathan Post, Distinguished Professor of Humanities at UCLA, and a summer resident of Stonington,

introduced Rankine. He began by noting that Rankine’s most recent work, *Citizen*, has become a cultural document “in a way very few books do, let alone books of poetry.” Rankine’s *Citizen*, Post observed, “[is] a highly nuanced, often moving account of ‘micro-aggressions’... It is also, on a larger, more public scale, a catalog of wounds, the wounded, and the dead, a work of naming and mourning, as ancient, in this regard, as Homer’s *Iliad*... Quietly searing, it is difficult, in many senses of that word, and boundary breaking.” Recalling how Rankine had once described it as a book “about intimacy and the way it gets polluted by bias,” Post observed “That almost makes *Citizen* a love story, and to some degree it is.”

Rankine has just launched the first issue of her new Racial Imaginary website (funded by the “genius grant” she received from the MacArthur Foundation last year) and is partnering with the Whitney Museum and other cultural venues in creating a series of exhibitions and performances in the year ahead that will explore the concept of “whiteness.”

## Making a House a Museum

**WHILE THE FIRST 20 YEARS**

of the James Merrill House have been about preserving James Merrill’s legacy in Stonington through the writer-in-residence program, the next five years will place equal emphasis on the preservation of Merrill’s apartment and its collections inside 107 Water Street. This was the preliminary conclusion of the Committee after the first CAP assessment in October 2017.

The CAP program, supported through the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, is designed to help small and mid-size museums improve the care of their collections. Following the designation of National Historic Landmark status, the Merrill House Committee brought in assessors Elizabeth Morse and Alicia Svenson to carry out its first CAP assessment. They spent two days examining the house and contents, cellar to roof, and interviewing tenants and the committee. Their invaluable recommendations will guide us as we consider how best to balance writers’ access to James Merrill’s apartment with appropriate preservation.

As Fall 2017 writer-in-residence Dan Chiasson noted, there is really nothing else like the Merrill House. The challenges for preserving the environment at a professional standard are unique and compelling. We thank the Hellen Ingram Plummer Foundation for their support in this process, and look forward to sharing progress with you in the next newsletter.

## Poetry on the Porch with Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner Dee Matthews

**ONCE AGAIN** Dorothy and Declan Doogan generously hosted this annual event—our fifth!—on their covered porch overlooking Sandy Point. Merrill House June Fellow Airea “Dee” Matthews, the 2016 Yale Younger Poets Prizewinner, read from *simulacra*, her debut collection of poetry, which Carl Phillips called ““rollicking, destabilizing, at once intellectually sly and piercing and finally poignant.” In his review for *The New Yorker*, Dan Chiasson described Matthews’ experimental forms as “Fugues, text messages to the dead, imagined outtakes from Wittgenstein, tart mini-operas, fairy tales... virtuosic, frantic, and darkly, very darkly, funny.”

Matthews’ poems, fiction, and essays have appeared in numerous journals, and her work was included in Best American Poetry 2015, edited by Sherman Alexie. Her performance work has been featured at the Cannes Lions Festival, PBS’ Roadtrip Nation and NPR. Previously the Assistant Director of the Helen Zell Writers’ Program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where she earned her MFA, Matthews is currently Assistant Professor in Creative Writing at Bryn Mawr and lives in Philadelphia with her husband and their four children.



June Merrill Fellow Dee Matthews reads from her work

## Beer & Murder to Benefit Merrill House

**WAS IT THE RISK-TAKING SON**, the all-knowing sister-in-law or one of the many other odd family members? On a blustery November afternoon 90 people converged at Mystic Luxury Cinemas to show support for the James Merrill House and to contemplate “whodunit” while previewing a new film, *Crooked House*, based on the novel of the same name by Agatha Christie. One of the author’s personal favorites, *Crooked House* tells the story of a young detective called in by his former lover to solve the murder of her grandfather. As he gets to know her ruthless

family, he realizes that she, too, is a suspect. As one audience member said, it had “enough suspense without scaring the wits out of us.”

Rather than a proper English tea, moviegoers were invited for a beer and wine reception at Jealous Monk, owned by Merrill House co-chair Bill Middleton, following the film. Use of the film and the theater were donated by Merrill co-chair Sally Wood, a producer of *Crooked House*, with the reception donated by Bill Middleton, resulting in 100 percent of the proceeds going to fund Merrill House programs.

# James Merrill

WRITER-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM & MUSEUM

James Merrill House  
107 Water Street  
Stonington, CT 06378

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

For more information about our programs, visit us  
at [jamesmerrillhouse.org](http://jamesmerrillhouse.org) and follow us on Facebook  
and Instagram.

## Calendar of Events

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 6**

**Mike Alberti,**

Winter Merrill Fellow,  
reads from his work.  
Stonington Free Library,  
5 pm.

**SUNDAY, APRIL 8**

**Suzanne Rivecca,**

Spring Merrill Fellow,  
reads from her work.  
Stonington Free Library,  
5 pm.

## “House” Party on the Rooftop

**AS IT FOLLOWED** 107 Water Street’s designation as a National Historic Landmark, August’s annual bash was dubbed accordingly. Arrayed across the dining table beneath the domed tin ceiling were nametags for the evening, conceived by Merrill Committee party-planner Sibby Lynch. Each tag honored a visiting artist, significant other, or borough legend who befriended Merrill and Jackson during their forty-odd year tenancy. After pinning on a *nom de guerre*, guests climbed the narrow stairway to the music studio beneath the rafters then proceeded through the sliding glass doors onto the deck for drinks and deviled eggs. Keeping with tradition, poet Kate Rushin (also a Merrill Committee member) stood up midway through the party to read from two of James Merrill’s poems—including “A Tenancy”—as guests, taking in the midsummer panorama of village rooftops and the harbor that drew Merrill to the place, took a moment “to be at home in it.”



Deck party musts: hearty hors d'oeuvres and icy cold cocktails (here passed by Charlie Clark and Sarah Dove) and a reading from Merrill’s work (this year delivered by Kate Rushin).