

Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Thursday, October 3
Luth Concert Hall
Prior Presents 2024–25

PRIOR
Performing Arts Center

Welcome

Dear friends,

In conversations with faculty when planning the 2024-25 season of Prior Presents, one thing was clear: the widespread interest in a possible visit from *New York Times*-bestselling essayist and poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil. It's no mystery why. Nezhukumatathil's work offers a beautiful, timely, and critically expansive model of writing, one that draws on intimate personal experience in order to deepen its author's and readers' connection to the complexities of the world around us. The residency now underway is also an occasion to celebrate the formation of two new interdisciplinary departments at Holy Cross—Environmental Studies and Critical Race and Ethnic Studies—whose interests are aligned with and illuminated by the questions pursued in Nezhukumatathil's writing.

The impact of that writing has been felt across our curriculum. Says Rob Bellin, Professor of Biology, on why he chose *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments* to be the book read by all first-year students, "Since I was selected as the Dean of the Class of 2028 back in March, I considered a fairly wide range of options for the first-year read. Once I read *World of Wonders*, it seemed to be an ideal choice. Nezhukumatathil's collection of essays weaves her experiences of nature with life experiences related to relationships, values, race, and hope. In addition, the book includes wonderful illustrations by contemporary artist Fumi Mini Nakamura that add greatly to the reader's experience. In its writing, illustration, and message, this is truly a beautiful book."

Nezhukumatathil's visit has not only attracted interest from Holy Cross faculty and students but from members of our broader Worcester community. In reflecting on the span of readers and audience members engaging with the author's work this week, I find myself thinking of a line from her essay on the peacock in *World of Wonders*. "What the peacock can do," Nezhukumatathil writes, "is remind you of a home you will run away from and run back to all your life."

We often look to art to give us new ideas of what is possible, to introduce us to worlds far beyond what we know. Yet this line about what one of nature's most astonishing animals does for Nezhukumatathil reminds me of what art can also do for all of us: orient and reorient us to who we are. From first-year students who have just left home for the first time to lifelong learners who have in some way journeyed far from where they started, transformative experiences with art can enable powerful forms of self-recognition. One goal of a liberal arts education, and one potential impact of a liberal arts ethos on a college's broader community, is to emphasize both of these opportunities at the same time: the chance to look beyond ourselves—at the wonders all around us—and the chance to meet and re-meet ourselves as we make our way through the world.

I hope you have a wonderful time this evening with Aimee Nezhukumatathil. In the meantime, it's not too soon to begin planning your next visit to The Prior: check out the end of this program for the rest of the 2024-25 Prior Presents series; and visit our website, priorperformingartscenter.org, for our full slate of academic and community programming.

Warm wishes,

Kyle Frisina
Nancy Savage Skinner '79 Interim Director

Biography

Born to a Filipino mother and Malayali Indian father, **Aimee Nezhukumatathil** (neh-ZOO / koo-mah / tah-TILL) is the author of four books of poetry: *Oceanic* (Copper Canyon 2018); *Lucky Fish* (2011), winner of the Hoffer Grand Prize for Prose and Independent Books; *At the Drive-In Volcano* (2007); and *Miracle Fruit* (2003), all from Tupelo Press. With Ross Gay, she co-authored *Lace & Pyrite* (Organic Weapon Arts, 2014), a chapbook of nature poems. She is also the author of the collection of nature essays, *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments* (Milkweed, 2020), which was Barnes and Noble's 2022 Book of the Year. Most recently, she authored her second essay collection, *Bite by Bite: Nourishments and Jamborees* (Ecco, 2024), which explores the way food and drink evokes our associations and remembrances – a subtext or layering, a flavor tinged with joy, shame, exuberance, grief, desire, or nostalgia.

Lucky Fish won the gold medal in Poetry for the Independent Publishers Book Awards and was featured in the New York Times and on the PBS NewsHour ArtsBeat. Poems from this collection were also awarded an NEA Fellowship in poetry, the Glenna Luschia Prize from Prairie Schooner, and the Angoff Award from The Literary Review for the best poems appearing that volume year. *At the Drive-In Volcano* was named winner of the Balcones Prize, which honors an outstanding collection published the previous year. Her first collection of poetry, *Miracle Fruit*, was selected by Gregory Orr for the Tupelo Press Prize and was the winner of ForeWord Magazine's Book of the Year Award in poetry, the Global Filipino Literary Award. Other awards for her writing include the Pushcart Prize, a poetry fellowship to the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, the Boatwright Prize from Shenandoah, and the Richard Hugo Prize from Poetry Northwest.

World of Wonders, Nezhukumatathil's first nonfiction book, is an illustrated collection of nature essays told in the context of her unusual childhood growing up on the grounds of mental institutions in rural America and navigating the parent-push towards science while finding herself drawn toward language—all unfolding through detailed and delightful observations about the oddities and fascinations of our planet. Warm, lyrical, and gorgeously illustrated by Fumi Nakamura, *World of Wonders* is a book of sustenance and joy. Author Kiese Laymon says the collection is “the first book to make me feel like a firefly as much as it reminds me I’m still a black boy playing in Central Mississippi woods. The book walks. It sprints. It leaps. Most importantly, the book lingers in a world where power, people, and the literal outside wrestle painfully, beautifully. This book is a world of wonders. This book is about to shake the Earth.”

Her poems and essays have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, *Quarterly West*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *FIELD*, *Antioch Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Tin House*. Poems and essays have been widely anthologized in such venues as *The Best American Poetry* series, Billy Collins' second edition of Random House's *Poetry 180: A Poem a Day and Language for a New Century: Contemporary Asian American Poetry* from W.W. Norton. A number of essays and poems have also been published in several high school AP English textbooks and college textbooks.

Nezhukumatathil is known for her dynamic and joy-filled teaching. Equally at ease in a university or high school classroom, she often serves as a poetry “ambassador,” bringing the delights and joys of reading and writing poetry to classrooms all over the country. She has twice served as a faculty member for the Kundiman Asian American Writers' Retreat. Her books are widely adopted for high schools, colleges, and universities as part of contemporary poetry, women's studies, and Asian-American literature classes; and she has been a featured reader at over a hundred venues across the globe from Amsterdam to Singapore.

Nezhukumatathil is a professor of English and teaches environmental literature and poetry writing in the MFA program of the University of Mississippi.

The Prior Performing Arts Center

An uncommon commons for transformative experiences with the arts

2024–25 Prior Presents Season

Prior Presents is the keystone of the Prior Performing Arts Center's public-facing programming, merging thrilling live events by visiting artists with robust educational and outreach activities. Defined by exceptional artistic quality, interdisciplinary impulses, and the potential to spark both wonder and reflection, this annual series celebrates artistic risk-taking and the exchange of ideas and perspectives from around the globe. Short- and long-term visiting artist residencies include performances, artist talks, installations, workshops, and experiential learning opportunities for Holy Cross students and the greater Worcester community.

The internationally acclaimed artists of the 2024–25 season embody our vision for artist residencies at the Prior Performing Arts Center. Their performances and lectures offer an exhilarating complement to the creativity and innovation of emerging student artists and Holy Cross faculty and staff also featured in our season this year.



Sojourners

Coming Soon to Prior Presents:

Mfoniso Udofia's
Sojourners | Pop-up from
The Huntington Theatre

"*Sojourners* offers a moving and powerful corrective to the notion that what immigrants leave behind is always awful, and that what they find is always worth the trip." — *The New York Times*

A young Nigerian couple arrives in Houston looking to earn their degrees and bring insights back to their home country. This pop-up production is brought to The Prior by the Huntington Theatre as part of Boston's nine-part celebration of playwright Mfoniso Udofia. Free entry courtesy of Boston's Mayor Wu.

Tue Nov 19 @ 7:00 PM
Free Entry, Tickets Required



Scan to purchase tickets and learn more about our schedule of upcoming presentations.

Coming Soon to Prior Presents:

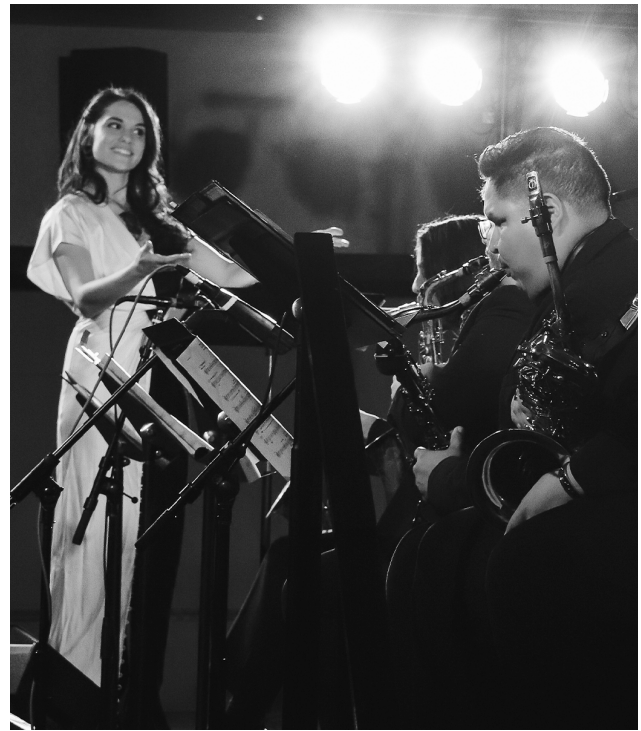
Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band with Mali Obomsawin

"Jazz is a uniquely American art form. The Julia Keefe
Indigenous Big Band...takes that one step further."
— *Olympian*

Led by celebrated vocalist Julia Keefe (Nez Perce),
The Julia Keefe Indigenous Big Band is an ensemble
of Native and Indigenous jazz musicians from across
Indian Country. Opening act by Mali Obomsawin
(Odanak First Nation), an award-winning bassist,
songwriter, and composer whose debut album
"Sweet Tooth" has received international acclaim.

Fri Nov 22 @ 7:30 PM

Use code JKIBB20 for 20% off your order!



Coming This Spring to Prior Presents

August Wilson's *Two Trains Running* | The Acting Company

As their neighborhood changes in unpredictable ways, a beloved Pittsburgh diner owner and his customers seek work, love, and justice in this heartfelt and hilarious play. *Two Trains Running* is the 1960s chapter of acclaimed playwright August Wilson's American Century Cycle, a decade-by-decade saga of African American life in the 20th century.

Mon Feb 10 @ 7:00 PM

Jha D Amazi of MASS Design

A free public lecture from the head of the Public Memory and Memorial Lab at the pathbreaking MASS Design Group. The lab's projects honor the experiences and cultures of communities historically underrepresented in our memorial landscape, with works including The Embrace in Boston and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama.

Tue Mar 18 @ 6:00 PM

Sphinx Virtuosi | *American Form/s*

A journey through classically-framed infusions of soul, bluegrass, jazz, blues, and rag from the dynamic and inspiring chamber orchestra Sphinx Virtuosi, *American Form/s* is a co-production with Music Worcester.

Sun Mar 30 @ 4:00 PM



Scan to purchase tickets and learn
more about our schedule of
upcoming presentations.

Currently at the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery

Blue Profundity: Contemporary Artists Revisit A Color

This exhibition features contemporary artists Adam Chau, Ifé Franklin, Michelle Samour, Heather Evans Smith, and Andrea Pettway Williams, who incorporate blue in their work to highlight the color's symbolic and historic meanings.

Open now through Dec 20

Upcoming Events from Academic Arts

Mike Monaghan & Friends

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Renowned Jazz musician Mike Monaghan and his colleagues, Ben Cook, Marshall Wood, Marty Richards, John Wilkins will perform an exciting evening of jazz improvisation.

Thu Oct 10 @ 8:00 PM

Working Writer Series: Allegra Hyde

CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM. Fiction writer Allegra Hyde is featured in this Working Writer Series event sponsored by the Creative Writing Program.

Thu Oct 24 @ 7:30 PM

Sunshine Over the Blessed Earth | Holy Cross College Choir and Chamber Singers Concert

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Music celebrating life, earth, and heaven from geographically distant locations. Most of the selections on this program come to us from countries that are over 4000 miles away; locations that would take multiple legs of transportation, or are otherwise a challenge to access from Worcester, MA.

Fri Oct 25 @ 8:00 PM

Holy Cross Wind Ensemble & Worcester Youth Wind Ensemble

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. The Holy Cross Orchestra collaborates with the Worcester Youth Wind Ensemble for this shared concert at Luth Concert Hall.

Mon Oct 28 @ 7:30 PM

Holy Cross Chapel Artist Series: Johann Vexo, organ

DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC. Johann Vexo, organist for the Cathedral of Nancy, France, will perform in the St. Joseph Memorial Chapel as part of the Holy Cross Chapel Artist Series.

Tue Oct 29 @ 7:00 PM

Cymbeline by William Shakespeare

DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE & DANCE. Ed Isser directs this Shakespearean fairy tale filled with action and song about an ancient British king married to a wicked queen who conspires against his daughter, Imogen.

Oct 31 - Nov 10



Scan to purchase tickets and learn more about our schedule of upcoming presentations.

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NEW! Refreshments at the O'Connor Family Café

We're delighted to share that patrons may now **visit the O'Connor Family Café** on the ground floor (the Beehive) of The Prior to purchase **coffee, tea, Italian sodas, alcoholic beverages, and snacks**. The Café will be open until show time before all Prior Presents events and on select other occasions.

priorperformingartscenter.org



Prior Presents 2024–25

Clockwise from top left: Camille A. Brown & Dancers; Worcester Chamber Music Society with Johnny Gandelsman, violin. Photography by Troy B. Thompson.