

BRUNEL INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN POETRY PRIZE SHORTLISTS



INTERVIEWS WITH AFRICA IN DIALOGUE

Curated By Gaamangwe Joy Mogami

(In collaboration with Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature)

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Introductions by Gaamangwe Joy Mogami

The idea to interview the 2017 Brunel International African Poetry Prize shortlists, and to package the interviews in one collective ebook came from an instinctual interest in rendering new expansive spaces and understanding to the shortlisted poems, and the poets who created them. I wanted to highlight the power of poetry, in the way that it explores and illuminates narratives, experiences and worlds that exists within the poets as much as the reader. I wanted to engage the poets and possibly discover; who is speaking? who is living here? what hurts here? and what heals here?

In a span of seven days, I interviewed the ten shortlisted poets, wherein we discussed various topics: Richard's endless reinvention, psychogeography and the power of African languages; Saddiq's defiance to African stories gatekeepers, family tales and the insurmountable power of love; Yalie's reclamation of her Sierra-Leone heritage, unbecoming invincible and the potentiality of sincerity to change the world; Nick's take on Idi Amin's regime and its impact on Uganda, the disregard to Black death and the importance of writing our African stories as Africans; Kechi's reclamation to memory, nationalistic forced amnesia, and the road to understanding; Romeo's violent and dark realities of Queer men in Nigeria, navigating religion and hatred, and the beauty of water; Leila's perpetual longing, life as an Arab, Muslim woman post 9/11 and post Trump and love as a gift; Rasaan's relentlessness, documentation of Boko Haram's occurrences in North Nigeria, and the activating powers of awareness; Sahro's power of crude language, navigating her sexuality in a homophobic environment and twenty seconds of bravery; Kayo's writing beyond language, the lack of assimilation of immigrants and the multi-layers of selfhood.

Here, we learn that the poets are the custodians of our realities and histories. That there is a lot of ourselves in each other. That we live in many worlds; in poetry, in silences, and in each other. And the more initiatives like the Brunel International African Poetry Prize exists, the more Africa can speak and unspeak, occupy and unoccupy, learn and unlearn, remember and unremember, heal and heal herself.

RICHARD ODUOR ODUKU



Richard Oduor Oduku is a post-cynical humanist, a researcher, and a poet and writer. He studied Biomedical Science and Technology and works as a research consultant in Nairobi, Kenya. He has been published in *Jalada Africa*, *Saraba Magazine*, *Kwani? Storymoja*, *This is Africa* among others. His story ‘eNGAGEMENT’ published in the *JaladaAfrofutures* anthology was longlisted for the BSFA Awards 2015. He is also a Nonfiction Editor at *Panorama – The Journal for Intelligent Travel*. He is a founding member of *Jalada Africa* and is also a Co-Curator and Festival Coordinator for the *Jalada Mobile Literary and Art Festival* running in five countries in East Africa.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the bustling cosmopolitan, city of Nairobi, Kenya by Email.

Gaamangwe: Richard, congratulations for being on the Brunel International African Poetry Prize shortlist. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted?

Richard: It is a good feeling to know that somebody enjoyed what I wrote. Going through hundreds and hundreds of submission to find one or two or three which sparks enough to light one's fire is a difficult thing, and so I'm grateful for the honor of being named alongside contemporaries shape shifting the landscape of writing within the continent.

Gaamangwe: Your poetry is indeed illuminative. What narratives are you trying to explore with your poetry?

Richard: I speak with many voices. I'm fluid enough to flow into any conversation, and drown into so many floods. It is the curse of the vain. The relentless pursuit of knowing, the chronic insatiability. But I have always been interested in meanings, in the boundaries of things. Where does one thing begin, where does one thing end. What is mixing with what to create what and how?

And to know, I have to hear and see. One can say my poetry, at least now, is an experiment at seeing and hearing, much clearer than I was doing before. I'm trying to absorb so much that is good in the world, in the vain hope of becoming a better self.

So what I'm exploring now is just how to see better, how to hear better, how to feel my footsteps and how to hear my words before they reach an ear other than mine. I'm doing this to try to reclaim my innocence.

I was listening, the other day, a TED talk by Lidia Yuknavitch, and she said something like we have the ability to reinvent ourselves, endlessly. I want myself and my poetry to be solid enough as the roots of a huge ober tree, but I also want the ability to reinvent myself endlessly, and this means that my poetry will probably feature things, places, and people in an endless process of reinvention, of metamorphosis.

Gaamangwe: That's powerful. What are you reinventing yourself from, and to what?

Richard: That is now a difficult question. I don't know how to answer that. How much do we know about our own lives? How much of the narrative we have created for our lives is true?

So maybe when I talk of learning to see and hear better, as a way of knowing myself better, as a way of giving myself countless opportunities for reinventing myself endlessly, I know it looks like a process of moving from point A to B, what I mean is that by being acutely self-aware, the process is also the result, the departure is the destination.

What I mean, if I'm to borrow, some words from the movie *Waking Life*, is that "the idea is to remain in a state of constant departure while always arriving."

Gaamangwe: So reinvention here, is merely re-encountering the self with a new light or understanding. Nothing is being erased or re-made in a new form. I love that. What are the speakers in your poetry being acutely aware of and arriving to?

Richard: Yes! You've said it rather beautifully! The speakers are the many voices I talked about. For some time now I have been intellectually interested in psychogeography, injecting a little playfulness in life and willing to drift, or as Guy Dubord would say, to escape the spectacle of modern life. I think we are living in an age of distraction, and life has become an immense accumulation of spectacles. In this age of inauthenticity we risk passing through life asleep. We'll become spectators, watching our own lives race by. So in living, as in writing the poems, I have become more interested in what I'm seeing and what I'm hearing when I navigate my existence in different spaces and environments.

So the speakers in the poems are just observing and taking notes. Some of these observations, these notes become poems. Some fall on the wayside like a half-heard conversation when one cuts Nairobi's streets like a laser beam. Some are memories of a life lived, a life observed elsewhere years ago. Such recollections sometimes demand the privilege to be written, to be preserved between pages as poems. Some are tapped, conversations one wasn't supposed to be part of but have, with much mischief, become their chronicler. There are many voices. My work is just to be self-aware, to be unclogged enough to allow the rivers of humanity to pass through my processing system.

The poems, including the few that were sent for the prize, came from these many places, bearing many witnesses, conspiracies, and hallucinations.

Gaamangwe: I also think a lot about how geographies influence people. What of my psyche, and my life, is merely a result of the placement and the realities of the places I inhabit. What are your thoughts on how the realities and history of Nairobi and Kenya has influenced your life and your poetry?

Richard: You know I was reading an interview done in the *Paris Review*. I think it is the *Art of Fiction* 225 and it features Herta Müller who was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize. In the interview, she complains that language is so different from life. How is one supposed to fit one into the other? So she says that the first thing one has to do is to take everything apart, that you cut out the reality and then you use language to create something completely different. If one is lucky enough, they may produce something that is much closer to the reality they wanted to capture before artificiality set in. We succeed, in the end, in writing half of what we intended, the other half remains as silence.

Silence too, is a form of speaking.

Your question reminds me of that answer Müller gave, that we must embody creation, become the creator. In a way, there are things that wake up history in us. Take for example Nairobi or Kenya. These are places with very complex histories. Sometimes the history you have been taught is not it. Is not the truth. So whatever you meet, whatever history I'm meeting, I have to try and take it apart. There are times when such a process allows me to see what was inscribed beneath, what has been covered by new paint. Most times it is unpleasant. I'm uncomfortable with any kind of history until I have laid it on my surgical table, dissected it and known what is stored in places one cannot see if they don't cut. I'm cutting open and recreating as I go. My hope is that I find the language each time I see something I should immerse myself in. The reality is that most times I don't, but I try.

Gaamangwe: Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, did say that reality exists independent from us. The human mind is translating our experiences as it passes through reality. There is a certain loss of translation too, also because we are perceiving too many stimulus at once, especially now. It creates a certain restlessness. But also, we are passing through new experiences, unique and different from the others, and that demands a different language.

But, do you think language is the only thing making translating life difficult? How else can we fill the gaps that exists in our histories?

Richard: Kant was right. And we are a medium for so many things. We are actively involved in translating the world, and giving meaning to experiences. Language is one of the biggest tools we have to do this job.

I do believe we, and I do not singularly refer to writers or historians, we have a responsibility, in our own individual ways to fill the gaps in our histories. A recent IBM report reported that we are generating 2.5 million terabytes of data per day. In Wikipedia alone, there are more than 5 million articles in the English language. If you add all the 293 languages, we have 40 million articles on so many diverse topics. Over 27 billion words on Wikipedia alone. These are the modern forms of keeping the translated histories, knowledge, memories, and imaginations of the world.

We can decide to be tangible, and ask ourselves: how many of our, I mean African, languages are represented in these expanding repositories of global memory? Very little, if any, of anything existing online today has been captured by our languages. And not only African languages, African people. We need to be more involved in translating the world through our own unique experiences.

There is a project on Languages and Translations that Jalada Africa has been running. The idea was to have one story, from a renowned African voice, and translating it into as many languages as possible. As we speak now, the project has translated Ngugi wa Thiongo's story, *Ituĩka Rĩa Mũrũngarũ*: Kana Kĩrĩa Gĩtũmaga Andũ Mathiĩ Marũngiĩ (The Upright Revolution: Or Why

Humans Walk Upright), into 63 languages. 47 of these languages are African. Now imagine that we have more than 2500 languages in Africa! Try to imagine how many stories are hidden in these languages.

In essence, I think that to bridge the gaps, we have to be part of the global community of knowledge generators, that way we leave our footprints on the world, even if we pass on. It is the surest way of, ensuring that our histories don't get lost in translation, of being heard, of bridging the gaps in our histories.

Gaamangwe: The Languages and Translations projects is such an important project. We really need more archiving, more translations, more engagements with our own languages, experiences and histories. But with Jalada Africa, and other literary magazines, and historians and storytellers, we will get there. Thank you Richard, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry prize and your poetry.

SADDIQ DZUKOGI



Saddiq Dzukogi studied at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. He has poems featured or forthcoming in literary publications such as: *New Orleans Review*, *African American Review*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Juked*, *The Poetry Mail*, *Chiron Review*, *Vinyl Poetry*, *ELSEWHERE LIT*'s anthology of contemporary African poetry, *The Volta*, *Construction*, *Welter*, among numerous others. He was a guest at the 2015 Writivism Festival in Uganda as well as at the Nigeria-Korea Poetry Feast in the same year. Saddiq is the Poetry Editor of the online journal, *Expound* and a three times a finalist in The Association of Nigerian Author's Poetry Prize. Saddiq lives in Minna, Nigeria. He can be found @saddiqdzukogi.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the calm, city of Minna, Nigeria by Email.

Gaamangwe: Saddiq, congratulations on being shortlisted for Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted?

Saddiq: Thank you for your kindness Gaamangwe, for asking time to talk to me. This is huge, any effort channeled towards informing you that what you do is important is huge. So being among the shortlisted poets in the running for the 2017 Brunel International African Poetry Prize is an incredible dream achieved, that my body is still struggling to come to terms with. When I received the email notifying me of my inclusion I was only able to muster a small voice to whisper to my lover, Mirah, my whole being still stuck in disbelief. I said "Mirah they say I made it to the shortlist" of course she had a loaded voice that filled up the sitting room. This is really, really huge, it means the little poems I write in the little corner of my room are speaking with the right voice. It means they are alive in the world.

Gaamangwe: I am excited for you. I want to speak about the voices of your poems. What do they speak of and for?

These are voices rising from the silence a body has been chained to. It is like the voices seek to break the body loose from this. The poems seek to say all the things I have not been allowed to say. Some of my poems are autobiographical and sometimes fictional, but most times these poems speak about the lives of those living close to me, speak about what I hear the street say. So basically you could say the poems try to speak for the voiceless, this include the poet himself.

Gaamangwe: What are the specific things that you and your speakers, have not been allowed to say?

Saddiq: Here especially in Nigeria, people think they've got a saying in your life, in the way you do things, how you should and shouldn't live, there is this perceived moral net where everyone is expected to live within. This is predominate in the Nigerian society especially up north, where the older folks think guys as young as myself cannot hold their own destinies in their own hands. As a young person in Nigeria the society doesn't listen to you, you are small to be listened to, the society thinks there is nothing positive the young adult can contribute. This is a society that wants to determine everything for you. How you should eat, how you should talk, who you should be, who you should love.

It is especially disappointing that even in the literary space this is true. Just a few days ago another

conversation began raging, and it is what issue the writer is expected to engage with. Then "Poverty porn", "Poverty porn". People expect a writer to engage the environment in a way that the literary materials produced must discuss issues that are politically relevant to the society. People expect the African text to be about struggles. Some do not think so, some think some writers exploit the yearnings for African sad stories by the west to exaggerate the plight of the African. I take all this to be bullshit, no one has got the exclusivity of prescribing what should be written. Personally I get sickened by this spectacular cases of corruption, mob actions on people who seek to express their sexuality the only way they know how. There are a lot of documentation that is needed about Africa, there is a lot the world doesn't know about Africa, and I expect the African gatekeepers and critics to know that it's ok to want to engage with another hue of Africa that the world is yet to interact with, it is okay for a writer to write about the colors, the laughter that have been able to rise from the ash of what we all have allowed to burn. It is okay for a writer to engage in what is of fascination to them, it is a free world and even if you are a religious person, God has given 'free will', why do men like taking that away?

Gaamangwe: I saw that conversation as well. It's really getting old. All stories are valid and serve different purposes to different people. The only role of the writer is to write whatever comes through them. For you, what are the worlds that fascinate you, and the ones you want to engage in with your writing?

Saddiq: Yes, yes you are right, let whatever that wants to come, come! I am just there floating and letting the worlds come through my eyes and live inside my body. I do not consciously try to engage a specific issue, I am so obedient to the muse, as I let my mind fondle with the knob of anything that fascinates me until the door opens to me and to the world. But unconsciously family tales have been a reoccurring issue in my writing, I talk more and more about family now, in addition to the environment. I love to pay mind to the things that are there but are seemingly too insignificant to the world of big significant things. The little things we take for granted are enormous, and those are the things I want the world to notice when it interacts with my writing.

Gaamangwe: I am often fascinated by individual realities, within their immediate environment too. I was moved by your poem "Father's demise", I wonder if it inspired by real events, and what meanings were important for you to explore in this poem?

Saddiq: Everybody wants to know if that story is real. Well, it was inspired by a real event, a friend's reality. He told me the story while I was at the NYSC orientation camp in Iseyin, the home town of Rasaan who's also on the shortlist. When I got that story it was frightening. This friend personally requested that I write about it. I was reluctant at first as I tried to encourage him to write it himself. But at the end, I internalized the story and made it mine. I wrote the poem keeping the flavor of the story and fictionalizing the content within the frame already drawn. In the poem I wanted to explore

the pretence that family love is unconditional, most times this is not completely true, because we lose claim to some degree of the familial love when we are not as family wants us to be.

Gaamangwe: That's a sad story Saddiq, but as you said, far more common than we realize. Many families exists on the continuum of both love and pain, a lot of traumas and grieves too. You explored a different love with "When the Clock Said". Can you tell me about this poem, and your thoughts about love in general?

Saddiq: This particular poem was basically about a love that has been lost and lamentations for the lack of it. Talking about love seem to be a lot more fun than it is now. As a teenager I indulge in writing of a lot of sentimental poems. Yes I agree with you that love comes with a lot of grief and traumas, especially the love of home; Nigeria. I find it funny how much I am grateful to Nigeria for messing us up this much. I am grateful because through the poems I am always able to make some sort of art from the pain, from the misery this home allows to batter my body. I have been thinking of late, that what would happen to me if I have the best conditions here, no wars, no killings, no lynching of innocent boys and girls, no hatred but the abundance of love. I am thinking what that may mean to the part of me that I cherish the most, the parts that respond to these things via art. I will readily give up this love for art to have a saner society here.

I love to think I am a lover. My father taught me that only love can save the world. The most complicated of problems the world faces could go away the next minute if everyone could just embody genuine love for the world we live in and uphold a sort of commitment to nullify hate, wherever we find it. I feel love is the strongest weapon, a lot of people think it makes you vulnerable to love, but that's not true, love makes you invincible because when you go into a supposed battle, you go in there with all your loved ones in your heart. They give you the strength to overcome anything that seems insurmountable.

Saddiq: This speaks to me. The only weapon we truly have against the darkness of the world is love. Light comes and multiplies in love! Thank you Saddiq, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

YALIE KAMARA



Yalie Kamara is a first generation Sierra Leonean-American and native of Oakland, California. Prior to becoming an MFA candidate at Indiana University, she worked in the field of social justice specializing in educational access and arts facilitation. She holds Bachelors of Arts degrees in Languages and Creative Writing from University of California, Riverside and a Masters of Arts degree in French from Middlebury College. Yalie's writing has appeared in *Vinyl Poetry and Prose*, *Entropy Mag*, and *Amazon: Day One*. Her forthcoming chapbook, [*When The Living Sing*](#), will be published by Ledge Mule Press in Spring, 2017.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the verdant, dewy, spring-soaked Bloomington in Indiana, USA by Skype.

Gaamangwe: Yalie, congratulations for being on the Brunel International African Poetry Prize shortlist. What does this mean to you?

Yalie: Firstly, it's an immense honor to have been chosen to share the shortlist title with such a talented group of writers from Africa and beyond. There is such a striking diversity in the stories that we are rendering poetically. It feels affirming to know that there is space for me to share my experiences as a Sierra Leonean-American and that it is being regarded as a narrative worthy of both attention and encouragement.

Gaamangwe: What experiences are you interested in exploring with your poetry?

Yalie: I think my main obsession is exploring notions of home. I'm curious about the experiences that we have that make us feel included or excluded. This theme is recurrent in all of the poems that I submitted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize—I look at this through the lens of language, heritage, Blackness, spirituality, education, police brutality. I find myself interrogating what identity affords us or denies based on the perception of the beholder.

Gaamangwe: How does being a first generation Sierra-Leone American inform your sense of personhood?

Yalie: I feel like this question is so dynamic in that it might yield a different response depending on the day! Growing up, I was so embarrassed that my parents would drop me off at school with Dr. Oloh's (he was a legendary Sierra Leonean musical artist) music blaring from the car! I wanted to fly under the radar and not feel different from my peers. I wanted my first name to be more easily pronounced by American tongues. I wanted to be the type of normal that I then perceived to carry a type of safety. The type of identity that my younger self wanted is what my current self would consider a boring and hopeless existence. I think the turning point may have occurred in high school. That was the point that I realized (and likely on my own terms) all that I did not know about Africa and all of the countries within it. I happened upon a plethora of gems and miracles through researching. I realized that the culture of Sierra Leone could be mine if I made a space for it within myself. After that, so much of the culture that I had grown up with had increasing relevance and began to anchor me. I found a harmony within the space of two cultures—I no longer felt like a victim of dislocation.

Gaamangwe: Talking about African names, your poem “Space” made me reflect on African names and how they are often made to disappear. For example, my full names are Gaamangwe Joy Chedza Mogami and somehow my second name, Joy has been prioritised over the others. For a long time, I thought it was mostly because it was the easier name, but now I am thinking more deeply about it, as something that enables the way cultures and histories disappear in Africa. But now I am working on claiming my names, as a protest against erasure, and being invisible. Do you also find yourself in a similar path of trying to unbecome invisible? Do you think it's even possible?

Yalie: I love this question as well! I think that unbecoming invisible is a daily practice—it’s a type of prayer—to have the courage to walk with your whole self no matter which arena you are stepping into. I am thinking about the things that have been used to make me feel invisible—my race, my ethnicity, my gender, my hometown, my dark skin, my full figure, my voice, my educational background, the list goes on and on. I think for me, the way that I legitimize self is expressing it through artistic expression. By self, I don’t necessarily mean only me. I am thinking about identity when I say this and the experiences that resonate with me on an empathetic level. And to answer your final question, yes I do think it is possible to unbecome invisible. I feel more grounded each time I complete a poem, because the guarantee of writing a completed poem is an honest engagement with myself. Every poem I complete is a practice of resuscitation.

Gaamangwe: That is true. You explored another theme of an act of erasure with your poem, “I Ask My Brother Jonathan to Write About Oakland, and He Describes His Room”. It got me thinking about the gender dynamics that exists in cases of Police Brutalities. In the way that perhaps, I am assuming, there is a different approach and energy exerted on male black bodies as compared to female black bodies. Do you think the narrative in the poem will be the same if the character was a female person?

Yalie: Every loss of life, especially in the context of police brutality is demoralizing, shameful, and dismal. There seems to be an unfortunate notion (held by an unfortunate number of Americans) that only Black men are the victims of police brutality. I think this might be a result of rhetoric being propagated by media outlets and institutions. Though this is certainly a true story, it is not the only story, and when we do not consider the sum total of bodies under siege, it presupposes that certain Black populations are immune to violence at the hands of law enforcement. There is a type of mythmaking and iconography that exists within Black death and pain that can divert us from the truth.

I think I would have written it the same way if I were writing a story about a woman. What is central to the poem is a palpable, endless, fear of the Black body. And an unwillingness of the world to welcome the subject's body into this space. It's a universal theme—negotiating the innocence of one's existence in order to accommodate another's terror.

Gaamangwe: I think the Black body experiences this much violence because the world keep on “othering” it. How do you navigate spaces of “othering”, and do you think we can move from this “othering” spaces?

Yalie: I think one way to move away from othering is making art that is honest, sincere, and authentic. I think the spaces to make art and dialogue about the underpinning of what we create is also crucial. I think that another way we might move away from othering is to have a practice of reflecting and thinking about the actions that we take and how those can allow us to have either an intimate engagement with another's humanity rather than estrange us from the ability to dignify each other. When considering transgressions and ugliness, I think action is important. As a writer though, I think that perhaps my world moves on a different time signature— I believe that oftentimes our empathy bubbles to the surface when we are still or asking questions—I think if there is a subsequent willingness to hear the answers that come to us, then we're more apt to have love and respect to dictate our next move.

Gaamangwe: Exactly. What do you hope to create with your poetry?

Yalie: I think I want to have integrity and allegiance to creating poetry that matters. What I mean by that is, I am not always invested in talking about hot and burning issues, I need time to process things so you may not see me writing about things that are happening in the moment. I write more about things that are happening in day to day life.

I make sure that I take my time to write a poem, to think about it and make sure that the details render an image, a narrative or a story that is in line with what I am trying to portray. I want my writing to be lucid and accessible. I don't want my writing to be understood by a certain group of people that have certain types of degrees from college or from a certain geographical location. I want my poems to transcend those things and the only way I can do that is if my artistic practice is rooted in sincerity.

What that statement means is I may not figure out a poem in 5 minutes, I may start at the middle of the poem and give myself time to do it. I have these moments where I am writing a poem and I'm

like “this poem is going to take 10 more hours for the first draft” and the fact that I am not just like “I don't have 10 hours” for this poem to be written. It feels good to know that I have some kind of internal poetry clock that is telling me what it might look like because maybe the 10 hours is actually 15 hours or 8 hours. To know that things take time and to not be afraid of that, that has been helpful for me. Being thoughtful, sincere, patient and reflective are actually all tools that have the potential to change things in the world.

Gaamangwe: Yes, I totally agree. Thank you Yalie, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

NICK MAKOHA



Poet Nick Makoha is a *Cave Canem* Graduate Fellow and a Fellow of *The Complete Works* in the UK. He won the 2015 *Brunel African Poetry Prize* and the Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Chapbook Prize 2016 for his manuscript *Resurrection Man*. His poems have appeared in *The Poetry Review*, *Rialto*, *The Triquarterly Review*, *Boston Review*, *Callaloo*, and *Wasafiri*. Find him at www.nickmakoha.com

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the cosmopolitan, busy city of London by Skype.

Gaamangwe: Nick, congratulations for being on the Brunel International African Poetry Prize shortlist. What does it mean for you to be shortlisted?

Nick: It means everything. I think there is a lot of work that goes in with writers behind the scenes, improving your craft, reading, workshops. So, it is always nice when there is an opportunity to show what you have been working on inside of your creative space and inside of your mind. Particularly the Brunel Prize because it does two things; it shows you a lot of good African writers, and it shows you where they are because they are all over the world. For me, it is an important way of engaging with a wider African literary community. This will probably be my last time to apply because my book is coming out soon but I have enjoyed the process and it has helped me to develop as a writer by just applying for this award.

Gaamangwe: You have won the prize before, so what inspired the collection that you selected for this entry?

Nick: It's a body of work that I have been working on for a long time. I have probably been writing all my poems for probably the last five to seven years. I have been looking at the 1971-1979's Idi Amin regime and I was looking at how to bring to life that moment of history, which in many people's minds is almost a caricature of all the work or poems that have to do with that time. I didn't start out that way intentionally; I wrote one poem which was actually about my cousin who used to live in Kenya and has now died but from that poem, poems about my life and Uganda started to drip through and I had to pay attention to that. That is pretty much how it worked and the way I work is that I focus intently on something. It took me a while to kind of get my confidence. I didn't want to write things that I had heard before or how other people might write about war, so I really tried to find an original way of suggesting something that people already know. Everyone knows about some kind of war and everyone thinks they know about Africa and I was like; "How do I open a conversation about war in a particular area of Africa that makes it seem necessary?"

Gaamangwe: Besides illuminating the history of Uganda and the events that happened during the Idi Amin period, what do you hope you could illuminate further? This original angle, where is it leaning towards?

Nick: You always start something by digging at the roots, because you are as strong as the roots.

What I want people to do is not just look at my work but look at Uganda in general and not just glance it over. I feel East Africa has a lot to add to the creative economy, so I am hoping that my work will be one of several works that will emerge as originating from East Africa because the story is from Uganda. I am hoping that my work will be one of several stories that will show this place called Africa, this place East Africa, this place called Uganda and encourage people to find out more. I also hope this will encourage writers both native and in the diaspora to say “I’ve got a story to tell and I’ve got an interesting way to tell it” in the way that other writers have been doing. Poetically Derek Walcott did that for me, the way he spoke about the Caribbean made me confident to speak about my home land because even though I am not in my home land I still relate to it as home. I believe that we have an interesting literature and interesting stories which need to be told from that space. So what I am hoping is new is that people learn more about Uganda beyond the existing narrative of Idi Amin. Most times people forget that there were people affected by what happened because of Idi Amin. I took my wife to Uganda and she said to me, “Wow these people are really friendly and they are warm. I like this place”. If all you have for reference about Uganda is Idi Amin, then you have this one image that is overtaking the true image of Uganda. I hope the reader can see that there is much more to Uganda than her history.

Gaamangwe: So Candidate A is Idi Amin, right?

Nick: Yes, A for Amin. I wanted to highlight that people forget that he was selected. The British colonials wanted him in power and they thought he could be their puppet. On one level we look at it and say “Oh Idi Amin was so horrible” which he was, but we also have to ask and understand who put him in power and who gave him access to that power. A lot of the time you can just subscribe the blame to Africa and its dictators but we have to think and ask: what is the climate that allows that to happen repeatedly? What is the gain of the west in allowing dictators to destroy a perfectly running economy and then come in when it is almost destroyed and say we will help you?

Gaamangwe: I do wonder about what could have possibly stopped him?

Nick: The reality is that Idi Amin was a very menacing character but he wasn't the only villain. We were up against a lot. There was the colonial regime, where when it was told to leave after independence it didn't want to leave. So it stayed and put their own puppets in power. There was a game that was being played and it was very strategic with the power of the people. There had a wild man acting as their puppet, and that enabled him to do all the damage he did. He destroyed the economy and created havoc countrywide. And also made it difficult to reclaim our country.

I don't think they realised how gruesome he would be, they thought that he had no brains. He had some brains, and this insatiable need for power. The thing to also understand, is that while we were being colonized they removed us from power and from the decisions affecting our country.

So when you place anyone in there, it is a drunk sense of power. I am not saying what he did was right but it was a dangerous position to put just one man in it. It needs people who can hold the man in power to account. You have to ask yourself why didn't the colonials intervene sooner? Why did they allow that to happen? They still allow this to happen, Uganda is not the only place where this has happened. It is something they have done before and something they will do again and that is my biggest concern.

Gaamangwe: I understand the yearning for power and how that drove a lot of the activities that happened during that time but I am disturbed by the kind of mind he had.

Nick: I think any person is capable of extreme good and extreme bad and evil. It's like making a soup, you add certain ingredients to the pot and it will taste a certain way and if you add too much it will taste a certain way. What you have to understand is that the conditions allowed for a person such as Idi Amin to become a dictator. I don't think he woke up and said "Hey I am going to be dictator". I believe there were many factors that aligned themselves that allowed him to make choices. The choices that he and others made led to the constant spiral of events that happened.

These choices are what made Uganda what it is and many decisions were made that we have to think about responsibly when placed in that position. There was paranoia, world agendas and tribal agendas (Uganda became about tribal feuds as opposed to our differences bringing us together). There were many factors, we can't just look at Idi Amin as this one entity of evil against this beautiful country. That is what I hope the poems and the book intends to look at.

Gaamangwe: How are you and other Ugandans trying to un-occupy this history?

Nick: For me, I have turned it into art. Because art is a way of looking at beautiful and horrific things in the world. The way that we get over it is by allowing ourselves to look at it as opposed to what we do in most times of trauma; avoiding, suppressing or denying. What I am hoping for is we can learn it from looking at this. We can have a discourse, and hopefully transformation and eventually change. We also can't forget our pasts because part of the error that we keep making is because we forget our pasts. The past is not meant to be remembered with judgment, it is to be remembered as learning tool, as a guide, as a way of understanding people.

As for Ugandans, I can't speak for them but I hope there has been change. We as a nation are moving on and I think only time can answer; what is life for Ugandans right now, what space do we occupy in the world consciousness, what is the life of a typical boy or girl in Uganda, and what are the prospects for prosperity in Uganda. If there are green ticks in those areas then we can say that we are moving on. What I want as anyone would want for their country is that my country be a player in the world economy, I want my country to be the one where the native Ugandans are thriving, for me as an artist to thrive artistically, in business and science and within families. That we are not a nation that is just persecuted by war. That for me would be the measures of success.

Gaamangwe: For Ugandans and other black people we have been persecuted a lot for the bodies that we inhabit and for the lands that we inhabit these bodies in. You explore this in the “Black Death” poem. I wonder if it's also in the same stream of line about Idi Amin or it was a different theme all together?

Nick: Although it's parallel with Black Lives Matter, “Black Death” is still about Uganda. A lot of times when we focus on war, we focus on the opposing powers - that this country is fighting against this country, this tribe against that tribe and this party against that party. What I was interested in with this poem is that while people are discussing the rights and wrongs of what they believe, they are leaving behind the bodies. I wanted to look at how bodies were affected. The poem focuses on the loss of life and the value of life, and hopefully it shows the value of black lives. Sometimes when we talk about dictators in African countries, we don't realise the loss of life and what that means. So the poem hopefully shows the value of the black body.

Gaamangwe: This is true. We need to look more on how lives are lost and altered forever. I think the work that you are creating with this collection is very important.

Nick: Thank you, I appreciate that. I hope this collection also encourages other artists to look at their countries in Africa and to write stories about them because that is important. Otherwise our stories will always be told by other people. One of the things that Kwame Dawes brought to my attention is that; “The most interesting story right now is the African story” and that has many shapes. So we need to claim that and write the Africans version of things. We also can and have to participate and contribute to the world dialogue, with our point of view in its different forms.

Gaamangwe: That's the exact reason why I do Africa in Dialogue! Thank you Nick, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

KECHI NOMU



Kechi Nomu was born in 1987. She grew up in Nigeria under two Nigerian dictatorships. Her poems have appeared in *Saraba Magazine*, *The ANA Poetry Review*, *Expound Magazine*, *Sentinel* and *Brittle Paper*. She writes film and theatre reviews for *Olisatv*. Her short stories have been workshopped at the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop and the Caine Prize Short Story Surgery. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared online and in print.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the busy hub of Yaba in Lagos, Nigeria by Email.

Gaamangwe: Kechi, congratulations on being shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean for you to be on the shortlist?

Kechi: I am still processing all of what it means, but gratitude is the clearest emotion. The news came at a time when I had a lot of questions. So, it felt like an answer on some level. It is also just stunning to me to be on a shortlist with poets whose works I greatly admire, for the Brunel!

Gaamangwe: What kind of questions are you exploring in your poetry?

Kechi: I am very interested in memory. In the ways that this works for the individual and for people connected to a place (country and community) who have shared history. How certain events move from the center to the fringe of a larger consciousness but may remain very present for some people. Particularly in the ways that these things touched their lives. I was talking to a poet friend about this exact same thing days ago because well, it just is something I'm very preoccupied with.

The ways that a glitch in the day can mean so many different things in a place like Nigeria where things like memory and nostalgia—just the right to say that this happened in my small corner and this is what it means or continues to mean for me—can feel like such a luxury and in some cases, such a contested thing. In my writing, I try to reclaim a space to say these are the things I know that don't fit into the general story and yes, they happened.

Gaamangwe: I am also obsessed with memory, specifically the collective unconsciousness of our ancestors, and how that affects our lives now. Latent memory. Which specific memories are you exploring?

Kechi: Wow. I had to sit with the thought of 'the collective unconsciousness of our ancestors' for some time. The weight of what remains untouched just stared me in the face. It is so important that you do this.

For me, you know, I am never sure what memories want to be told or explored. It is just the ways that memories spill out of places where a lot of effort has been put into containing them. But I am interested in selves or people set up to function outside of the memory of what they have lived and how this effort to contain/shut their memories fail. When a country for instance tries to negate memory with nationalistic slogans and the lid keeps coming undone or does not fit properly and there is a bubbling over. I think in this way, poetry functions as a collector. These are the things I think of.

Gaamangwe: That kind of nationalistic forced amnesia is disturbing. Because a lot of violence is performed within this space, where there is the expectation that people will forget. But memory doesn't work like that, even when you think you have contained it, most time it's seeping in unconsciously in daily events. This got me thinking about the memories in my country that we've been forced to forget, and also wondering, what memories in your country and personal space have been negated?

Kechi: Very true. I couldn't agree more. Memory is very autonomous. It belongs solely to the individual. In Nigeria, there is just a lot that has been negated by this collective silence and denial. This, even in the face of the work done, currently being done, to write these memories into being. In our contemporary history, there has been a civil war, there have been dictatorships each with its own specific brand of trauma. In the last decade, terror has had an incalculable effect and there has been a denial narrative consistently put out by the state. Such that, in the face of the relentlessness of this denial narrative, to be sentient, to remember, to claim memory, the ones that space is made for in the larger conversation and the ones that seem not to matter in mapping the big stories, becomes a radical thing.

Gaamangwe: At this point in human history, we really need to be radical. Because accepting these denial narratives is a very dangerous space where our existence is made to be insignificant. Which we cannot and should not have. How are you, and the speakers in your poetry becoming radical?

Kechi: The people in my poems, the poems I have been feeling my way through for a while now (as the poems I sent in for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize reflect) are wondering what love means, what it is worth when the object of love becomes a thing that is dangerous. How do boys love/long for fathers who want to consume them? How do men for whom the love of country/ideas of duty/honor/responsibility/expectation, return when the systems they have given themselves to fail them, what do they return to. How do girls love fathers whose memories they want to discard as much as they want to claim parts of them? How do children love mothers who make memory by the erasure of self, for whom this is what the equation of love looks like. How do people love places that turn on them? How do they carry the memory of these places across geographies, or for people who cannot afford physical distance, across time?

For the speakers in my poems, it is looking at a beast from angles that are familiar. Processing from these points that are true. Claiming the right to start from the confusion of what you are and then working your way to some kind of question.

Gaamangwe: These are really powerful angles of looking at love, especially love that walks

on a tightrope. What are you and the speakers discovering about love? What meanings and understandings are you and they making about love?

Kechi: You know, I wish I could say that we have begun to make discoveries for certain, things we can frame with language just yet. It does feel like we are on the road to understanding... there is a way that Toni Morrison frames it that makes sense to me and seems to fit where it is that we are and what it is that we are working through.

There is really nothing more to say - except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.

It's from 'The Bluest Eye' I think. Not very sure now. But, you know, I think to arrive at some point of discovery or meaning, I and the 'people' that inhabit me are feeling our way through the 'how'.

Gaamangwe: This speaks to me, Kechi. Thank you, and all the best with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

ROMEO ORIOGUN



Romeo Oriogun lives and writes in Udi, a little town in Eastern Nigeria. His poems, which mostly deal with what it means to live as a queer man in Nigeria, have been featured in *Brittle Paper*, *African Writer*, *Expound*, *Praxis*, and others. He is the author of *Burnt Men*, an electronic chapbook published by *Praxis Magazine Online*.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the hilly, little town of Udi, Nigeria via phone call.

Gaamangwe: Romeo, congratulations on being shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted?

Romeo: I started writing three years ago, so being shortlisted for the prize is a gift. I am still trying to understand what it means. I've went through some turbulent times and I don't expect good things to come, so I don't know how to respond when something good comes to me.

Gaamangwe: The speakers in your poetry also exists in turbulent time, where the continuum for love is very much weaved with a lot of darkness. Who do your speakers speak for and why is it important for you and for them to speak about these spaces where love meets violence and death?

Romeo: One thing I tried to do while writing these poems is; I want them to take a voice of their own. Some of those poems I wrote them without even knowing the next line. With that being said, the history of queer people in Nigeria has lot of violence in it. I think with the advance of social media it has escalated, because you have people saying they are protecting their spaces from western influence without knowing that homosexuality has always been a part of African culture and that there are already queer people in Africa. So you have these speakers who try to say; we have been here and this is who we are. Some of the poems have the speaker who tries to run away because the environment makes life difficult, and love is not enough to conquer it. These dark places happen around me, especially because you have the law that has criminalized queer people, and so you have people who are hiding to express and show love.

I think the speakers in my poems are trying to express how best they can navigate this dangerous time, so you have some of them running and some of them staying even with all this danger. But the most beautiful thing about love is that in the end it always wins, it might be difficult and very hard but at the end of the day, love wins. Whether they are running, staying or dying, you have people saying; "This is us, this is what we are, this is what we feel and you can't beat it out of us, you can't steal it out of us and you can't kill it out of us. We are queer people, we are here and we are beautiful."

Gaamangwe: I am really disheartened by what queer people go through. How do you approach, think and validate the love experience when it can possibly lead to end of life?

Romeo: The beautiful thing about love is that there isn't a box that can hold love. It is something that is powerful and boundless, it can't be changed and can be expressed in different ways. Religion has contributed to some people killing queer people. They say this is not our culture, but what they are trying to say is that queer people cannot be found in a religious context, and that queer people are forbidden in a religious setting. You find them being hunted, lynched and killed. What this basically means is that queer people must learn to navigate this hate.

It's a burden because you have an individual learning how to navigate hate and love at the same time. There is very little room for queer people, even in the literary world, because they are still frowned upon and pushed aside. We are fighting, writing and documenting but I feel that this is a battle that might not be won in my lifetime. We have to navigate so much and our lives are held in the balance depending on how we navigate these space every day. The thing is we can't pigeonhole people, we have to allow people to express themselves, talk about how they feel and express love in the way they want to. We are going to find out one day that love is something that is diverse, and that life itself is diverse, and this diversity is what makes everything beautiful.

Gaamangwe: What is the one thing that you would want to remove in society that would make the queer experience much safer and free?

Romeo: The truth is, the problems facing queer people is not just one thing. It is diverse, but at the moment if you were to ask me I would tell you it is the hatred. If it can be removed and people can look at others with love, and see that these people are human beings and their experiences are valid, then maybe slowly there will be a little bit of a safe space for queer people in Africa.

I wrote into a chapbook called *Burnt Man* after a queer man was lynched and beaten to death in Nigeria. Afterwards, I had different people attacking me, it was a very traumatizing time for me because it was the first time I was writing about the queer experience and I had never realized the level of hatred towards queer people.

Queer men are looked at as wicked people and not 'men enough' culturally. Africans claim to be religious, we have Islam and Christianity dictating the way we ought to behave and live, and it is in these religions that queer people are frowned upon. The most surprising and amazing thing is that the white man brought this religion to us, yet the white man is more tolerant towards queer people. At least in many western countries, queer people are safe. I think it has to do with culture, religion

and upbringing. I hope that the coming generation will make things easier but for my generation, our upbringing was very different, to the point where queer people hate themselves. They don't perceive themselves as beautiful and natural. That's adds another difficulty to this.

Gaamangwe: I wish people experienced religion mostly as life maps or efficient guidelines on how to navigate on life. Not as the one and only truth. Maybe that way we can understand that they are many ways to cross the forest of life. I can't imagine how one navigates this betrayal from society, to the point of rejecting oneself.

Romeo: I think for me because I don't expect much from society, I am no longer disappointed. Immediately after the Brunel Prize shortlist was out, a very good friend of mine said that I support perversion, I am a pervert and I should not reply him again. All this was very painful because even if I do not expect much from society, it still hurts. You expect at least educated people to be a little bit hospitable to us but you find that the hatred and rejection is more from them.

When my chapbook came out, a boy from Minna (a northern state in Nigeria dominated by Muslims) sent me a message and told me his father is a pastor and every night he cleanses his body and prays that he stops what he is feeling. He asked if I am a queer person, when I asked why, he told me he wanted to include me in his prayers because whatever I am feeling is a bad thing. He says he is praying against his body every day and is scared of his father knowing he is a queer person. I tried telling him about how beautiful and natural his body was but I knew this was not enough. This is someone who has rejected his body totally because he believes his body is full of sin. He doesn't know that because the sun shines everywhere, everybody has a space in the world.

Queer people rejecting their bodies is the most painful thing to me when it comes to the whole queer experience in Africa. People hate themselves and some commit suicide. It is very pitiful and sad because people are going against their bodies and rejecting what they feel.. The good thing right now is that we have some people who look at queer people as people and their experiences as valid. Every journey takes time, so if we take a step here and there, we will get there.

Gaamangwe: I applaud you for writing about these experiences no matter how heavy and sad and terrifying it is. The very fact that you are doing this, that is the light. On lighter things, I have noticed that water in its various forms and states, (rainfall, oceans, rivers) comes up a lot in your poetry. What does water symbolise for you?

Romeo: Water for me is something special and it has to do with my childhood. As I child, I lost my

dad and I had to live with an uncle. It was a very intense time because my mother was not allowed to take us - there was this battle between my dad's people and my mum's people for the custody. During that period, the only place where I could find peace was at a small body of water, a kind of stream. Along the road, you would find peace, birds singing and butterflies flying.

When I began writing I realised that it had taken a very significant place in my life and my writing. Water signifies peace and death and so many other things. It all depends on what I am writing about or the voice I am writing in. If I am writing in a very happy voice, it becomes a happy place and if I am writing in a sad voice, it becomes a place of escape - which is what water is to me. When the sea is crashing and the waves are going up and down, I feel detached from the world and I am entirely alone and there is beauty in that.

Gaamangwe: That's beautiful. Thank you so much and all the best with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

LEILA CHATTI



Leila Chatti is a Tunisian-American poet. She is the recipient of scholarships from the Tin House Writers' Workshop and Dickinson House and prizes from *Ploughshares' Emerging Writer's Contest*, *Narrative Magazine's 30 Below Contest*, the *8th Annual Poetry Contest*, and the Academy of American Poets. Her poems appear in *Best New Poets*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *Narrative*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *West Branch*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. She lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she is a Writing Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the tiny, tourist beach town of Provincetown, USA by Email.

Gaamangwe: Leila, congratulations on being shortlisted for Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted ?

Leila: Thank you so much! It's been a dream to be included on this list. I've made a point to always begin my bio with the fact I am both Tunisian and American, because it is very important to me to be recognized as both. I don't want any part of my identity erased for simplification sake. Though I live most of the year in the United States, I also consider Tunisia my home, and it is important to me that I am seen as an African poet as well as an American one. I see this shortlist as a nod to my place in African poetry, and that means a lot to me.

Gaamangwe: How does belonging to two countries influence your sense of identity, and the poetry you write?

Leila: Having two homes has meant I've always felt like a bit of an outsider—I'm too Tunisian to be a real American, and too American to be a real Tunisian. I think, of course, there are many ways to be both Tunisian and American, but it does complicate things to belong to more than one culture and place! In my work, I've noticed an obsession with longing and distance, which makes a lot of sense to me now that I'm aware of it—if ever I am in one place, I miss the other. I live in a perpetual state of longing. There's a sense of loss in my work, as well as excess; I have two languages, two cultures, two parent faiths, and they all get jumbled up.

Gaamangwe: I can't imagine what it's like to be in that kind of perpetual state of longing. Because I wonder if it can ever be filled? Do you think the two will eventually be whole; not loss, not excess? What are the things that make you too Tunisian for American, and too American for Tunisia?

Leila: I think it is filled with the excess of joy I have; while it's difficult to always be away from at least one half of my family at all times, I am lucky to have all that love to begin with. I don't think the two will ever be able to merge—there's the simple fact of geography, all that ocean between them—but I am happy enough, and wouldn't trade it. I think, overall, it's made for a full and interesting life.

As for what makes me feel like an outsider, there are lots of little things, and some big. Perhaps the biggest thing in Tunisia is language; while I understand Arabic fluently, I am shy about speaking, and as someone whose whole livelihood comes from words this is particularly challenging for me. I'm unable to express myself at the level I hold myself to in English. In the United States, my outsider status comes down to race and religion. I grew up in post-9/11 America, and so never felt fully embraced as American because I was Arab and Muslim. Those tensions are heightened now, with

the recent presidential election and conversations about travel bans and registries.

Gaamangwe: I can't imagine what that is like. To navigate the America of post 9/11 and post Trump as an Arab, Muslim and a woman must be very difficult. What do you want to illuminate about existing in the space you exist in, as these three forms of identity?

Leila: It's a very strange time. In the months following the election, I sunk into a period of real mourning; I felt lost, adrift. I couldn't focus. I was here in Provincetown, and had been working feverishly on my first book manuscript until that point, but the election derailed me for a good while. I hadn't anticipated him winning, and so was thrown into a panic when he did. It took some time for me to process—I read only Arab poetry for the month following and struggled to write anything myself—and I was frustrated that I was unable to make progress on my manuscript. I realize now that I was growing and learning during that time (any time reading is time well spent), but also that self-care *is* part of progress, a necessary part. And during those bleak winter months, I felt so angry and trapped and erased that I felt I had to *do something*; I ended up putting together another manuscript, *Tunsiya Amrikiya*, a chapbook about being Tunisian and American and growing up Muslim and female in both contexts, and I found out recently it will be published by Bull City Press! So something good did come out of that time, as hopeless as it seemed to me.

Gaamangwe: I think a lot about this attempt to erase other people. I am always wondering where this much anger and hate towards other people stems from. Why the world keeps on insisting on "erasing" whole people, and countries, and cultures. And how also, someone can actually have that much power to be able to affect the lives of million people, and have the whole world watch by. How did we create such a world?

It's wonderful that you will be published by Bull City Press. What meanings came up in *Tunsiya Amrikiya*?

Leila: I think that the answer to that is very long and very complicated and I don't believe I have it. I do think there is a lot of hate and rage in the world, so much of it I have to regulate the amount of time I spend on the internet for my own emotional well-being. It's disheartening, to say the least. I do try to wrestle with it often, both personally and in my work, and a fair number of poems from *Tunsiya Amrikiya* deal with violence and bigotry. But the manuscript is also celebratory; I wanted it to be a cry, of joy and pain, resisting erasure. I refuse to be silenced.

Gaamangwe: That's true, we must keep resisting erasure. Find and create our own acts of defiance. Speak for ourselves and for those who can't speak for themselves. But also, balance the dark with light, so yes to joy and celebration. The speakers in your poetry explore love; what are they discovering about it, and what does love mean to them?

Leila: I won't be shy—the speaker is almost always myself, so I'll speak to what love means to me. I believe, of course, that the world would benefit from more love. Though I write often about desire,

I'm interested, too, in love outside of a romantic or sexual context, love that exists in small, brief ways and love that endures or resists definition. I once thought that love was responsible for a great deal of suffering (love of one's country or God or race used as justification for violence, love of the self with disregard for all others), but I recognize those things weren't rooted in love at all and are instead distortions, powerful feelings mistaken for love. Love is a gift. I'll pursue it always.

Gaamangwe: Wonderful Leila! I totally agree. Thank you, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

RASAQ MALIK



Rasaq Malik is a graduate of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals, including *Michigan Quaterly Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Spillway*, *Rattle*, *Juked*, *Connotation Press*, *Heart Online Journal*, *Grey sparrow*, *Jalada*, and elsewhere. He is a two-time nominee for Best of the Net Nominations. His poem was among the finalists for the 2015 Best of the Net Nominations. Recently, *Rattle Magazine* and *Poet Lore* nominated his poems for the 2017 Pushcart Prize.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the dense, city of seven hills, Ibadan, Nigeria via Skype.

Gaamangwe: Rasaan, congratulations on being shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted?

Rasaan: I have been applying for the competition, every year since it started in 2013, and as a writer, you always hope that when you apply for a competition, you end up shortlisted or you win. So when I received the message that I was shortlisted, I was overjoyed. Being shortlisted means a lot to me, and my country Nigeria. We are pulling our hearts out and representing Nigeria in a big way, over there. So I am very happy, and truly grateful.

Gaamangwe: That's interesting that you've been applying for the past five years. If you look back at your past entries, what do you think was different about this entry?

Rasaan: I believe that I got shortlisted because of the consistency, and the passion and just refusing to relent. There is a slight difference in a way—even though I have been exploring the tragic and gloomy aspects of what is happening in my country—in my past entries. I think with this application I was a bit advanced and effective with the language I used. I think it's also because I have been reading new poetry collections and exploring poetry from other countries.

Gaamangwe: As you mentioned, the theme of your shortlisted poems are very haunting and dark themed. What inspired the poetry that you created with this entry?

Rasaan: I am passionate about the occurrences happening in my country. I think as a writer, you have to mirror society. So, I am interested in documenting the lives of the people that are helpless, especially people in the northern part of Nigeria, where you have Boko Haram killing people. I was doing research and watching documentaries concerning the Boko Haram's attacks. And I wanted to interrogate and document; what it means to live in that part of the country, what it means to be a parent expecting your child to come back from school, only for them to go missing and never come back, and what it means to survive, live and die in that situation.

Gaamangwe: Have you personally experienced what you wrote about?

Rasaan: I believe that everywhere, there is some kind of war. In the South-west of Nigeria, we don't necessarily experience war, but we have family, friends and our people living in the northern part of

Nigeria. In this digital age, we now have easy access to what is happening in our country, and the world, and so, in this way, we are affected. As a writer, you have to write about what's happening, especially because there are some aspects of what happens, that is not covered by the media. So what I do is; I read about these things, and if I have the chance and support I travel to that part of the country (because I value the need of going there, and seeing what people experience) and document those experiences. So my poems are imaginings based on real experiences.

Gaamangwe: I applaud you for deriving and humanizing other people's experience with so much tenderness and believability. What kind of spaces and dialogues would you want your poetry to open up?

Rasaq: I think about the realities of my country and of the world, what we endure, through all the wars happening all over the world. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has infiltrated everywhere and it's where one realizes; it could be you, it could be anyone that we know and love. Different people have travelled to this part of Nigeria, writing about these events, about the massacres happening in this regions and the abducted Chibok Girls. Of recent, we have not heard any news about Boko Haram. Things are getting better, and we are happy about that. So I think if we keep writing about these events, we reach other people, in the rest of the country and the world, and once people know, then change can happen.

Gaamangwe: You are right, because I am in Botswana and I learnt a lot from reading your poems. We need to humanizing war because a lot of people think of war as something that is outside there. Do you think that documenting and writing what happens in our communities and our realities can actually inspire change in some way?

Rasaq: Yes, I believe we can. I believe most human beings are sympathetic. The more we project and write about what's happening, the more people can be inspired to reach out to people in war-torn places and refugee camps. We have to write about our realities and experiences because these things are happening to us, and we can't hide that. Our writings can inspire others, even if that's one person it doesn't matter as long as one ponders on what we have written down, then that awareness is something. That awareness can lead to many things—some contribution, some development or some pro-activeness towards what's happening.

Gaamangwe: That's true. Can you tell me about the space you had to enter to write "*We don't know where we belong*"?

Rasaq: I put myself in that position: what my life will be like if I lived in Borno or in Kabino or any other war-torn places. I imagined myself there in that particular state and experiencing this, people throwing bombs and people dying. So it wasn't difficult for me to exploit that because I would be writing this as someone who was there. I said earlier that it could be anybody, just because I am not living in that state, doesn't mean I haven't been affected in my own way.

In the poem, I tried to talk about home, because this country is not the place to inhabit. A lot of people have died over the years and the only the thing we hear is rest in peace, and that's about it. It keeps happening. So I could enter this space because not only have I witnessed this, I have been affected by these events for a long time now.

Gaamangwe: You did a really great job as a witness, as someone who is affected, as someone who comes from Nigeria, who lives in that world. What do you hope you would create with your poetry?

Rasaq: I believe that art is a continuous thing, you don't stop living and you don't stop writing. I am passionate about writing to document, to narrate and to talk about experiences of other people and my experiences. I want to explore the biographies of people of the world, especially those who are unknown by the world. I hope to create poetry that is a continuous portrayer of everything that happens. So I believe that the continuous portrayal and exploration of events will inspire other people to help in a positive way. People will be able to realise that these things have been happening for a long time and will be able to stand up and act. I believe that in this way writing is transformative as it steers people to reason and act, which is what this world needs right now.

Gaamangwe: I completely agree with everything you have said. Thank you Rasaq, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

SAHRO ALI



Sahro Ali is a Somali-Australian hybrid. Her work explores ghosts of the diaspora, memories and trauma. She is a managing editor at *Kerosene Magazine*, a fledgling literary magazine created by and for marginalised artists. Her work is forthcoming in an anthology of anti-Trump work called *CONTRA*, which will be published by *Kerosene*. She is inspired by the women in her life who encourage and cultivate radical writing. She hopes one day to make them proud. She tweets @sahroAli.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the vibrant Victoria in Melbourne, Australia by Email.

Gaamangwe: Sahro, congratulations on being shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean for you to be shortlisted?

Sahro: Thank you! I'm still trying to wrap my head around it, there were so many amazing and talented poets who entered. I didn't really think I'd make the cut. The literary community is huge and it's easy to get overwhelmed and feel like you're not really a poet / writer if you're not churning out something every day. For me it's acknowledging that I am actually a writer. It's easy to get lost in your own head sometimes.

Gaamangwe: It's really exciting to read all of these works. What inspires your poetry?

Sahro: I'm in that early-stage of being a writer where all I can write about is my past experiences and trauma. Which results in crude imagery and language, and I feel like it's jarring in certain poems. I have a lot of ugly truths to write about and that's what inspires me to write most of the time. Things that people tend to shy away from and/or are tentative when approaching them. Using soft language to talk about something that's inherently evil and harrowing is powerful but so is using crude language. It's like you're meeting it face to face, and seeing it for what it is, if that makes sense. Other things that inspire me are my friends and how unafraid they are in everything they do.

Gaamangwe: It's really inspiring and empowering that at the early-stage of your writing, you are already going deep in your traumas. That really takes courage. What traumas from your past experiences are important for you to write about? What do you hope to illuminate about your ugly truths?

Sahro: I'm a daughter of immigrants and watching my parents struggle and try to make a living when I was younger was difficult. Especially as I got older, my parents were convinced I was this Anglicized devil. That's the subject matter for some of my poems--being stuck between borderlines. To answer the second part of your question, I really don't know. Right now it's just acknowledging them and accepting them as they are.

Gaamangwe: Is the conviction that you are an Anglicized devil because of your sexuality? Can you talk to me about existing here and how that conviction affected your personal reality?

Sahro: Yes, but it encompasses everything; me not wanting to adhere to Muslim dress codes, not knowing how to speak my native tongue, being bisexual. I was just constantly never meeting my parent's expectations and their conclusion was "Ok, you're just Anglicized." But in terms of my sexuality, that's something that's concealed in real life. I've only come out to my mum this year and before that I was closeted. I couldn't even say the word "gay" in real life. So I created my own space

online and surrounded myself with other LGBT folk, it's amazing. But once I go offline I'm hit with this toxic, homophobic environment where I have to control every word and movement. Even now, whenever I compliment women on TV, my mum side-eyes me and turns off the TV. Keeping to myself is something I've learnt in childhood, even if it's the painful option. That's the reality I live right now, to navigate this space as quietly as possible. Something I know I have in common with other young gay people.

Gaamangwe: That's a really difficult reality to exist in. You captured this difficulty in your poems; "Daughters" and "Dear Mother". There is this kind of erasure, where the mother forces or attempts to make the speaker become who she wants her to become. It creates a double-life kind of thing. Did that make accepting your sexuality difficult? What has empowered you to get to the point where you could come out to your mother?

Sahro: Oh yeah definitely, I went through that typical "maybe I'm not gay, I'm just confused" stage when I was coming to terms with my sexuality. I had to unlearn so much internalized homophobia and it was a painful and uncomfortable process (which is common and inevitable when you're unlearning anything). It was ten times harder because I'm Muslim and all my life I was fed these ideas that you couldn't be both Muslim and gay. Once I gave myself a space, however small it was, I was able to explore my sexuality and think and reflect. And being around other like-minded young gay people was all the more liberating. Also, I'm a total coward and depended on twenty seconds of courage, which left me the instant I told my mum.

Gaamangwe: I do think that twenty seconds is all the courage you need. You are brave, because there was so much at stake here. Thank you Sahro, and all the best with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

KAYO CHINGONYI



Kayo Chingonyi is a Fellow of the *Complete Works* programme for diversity and quality in British poetry. He is the author of two pamphlets, *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012) and *The Colour of James Brown's Scream* (APBF/Akashic, 2016). Kayo has been invited to read from his work around the world and his poems have been translated into Spanish, German and Swedish. He was awarded the 2012 Geoffrey Dearmer Prize and served as Associate Poet at the Institute of Contemporary Arts from Autumn 2015 to Spring 2016. His first full-length collection, *Kumukanda*, is forthcoming from Chatto & Windus.

This conversation took place in the cold, sweet-spot of Gaborone, Botswana and the cosmopolitan, busy city of London by Skype.

Gaamangwe: Kayo, congratulations on being shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted?

Kayo: It's an honour to be shortlisted. I'm particularly pleased to have made the shortlist in the last year I'm eligible.

Gaamangwe: What influences the narratives you illuminate in your poetry?

Kayo: I think my recent poems have been an attempt to articulate a hybrid sensibility. As an immigrant I am influenced by manifold things. I am bringing a different culture to the UK, and London specifically is mixed up in terms of the cultures that exists. There is an opportunity to be inspired by a range of things. For example, there are lots of coaches that have come together in London and so growing up I was listening to all sorts of music. And that influences my writing because when I started going out, reading and doing open mics, there was a lot of different styles of poetry that I was able to look up to and be influenced by. So as an immigrant, the spaces that I exist in are kind of hybrid, as a result. The poems are a space for those things to come together.

Gaamangwe: Yes, music does come up a lot in your poetry. What does music mean to you, and to the speakers in your poems?

Kayo: I think music has been the only mode of communication which is universal. To the extent that you have a hearing audience, then they can get something from a musical expression, where else a linguistic expression doesn't always convey information. Even when someone can't hear a song, there is still vibration and that too can communicate something, and I think there is something powerful about that. In poetry, I don't aspire to that level of universality or to communicate with as many people as music can, but I think there is something in poetry, which is finding the music inwards, and when you are tapping to that music you can communicate something beyond language. I think my work is a continuing fascination with that process of communicating something in language but beyond language at the same time.

Gaamangwe: On being an immigrant, how does this impact or influence your sense of identity, and how does that translate into the work that you put out?

Kayo: I think immigrants are rarely assimilated fully to a place. And as a result there can be a feeling of dislocation from the wider culture, which is useful for writing because you are always an observer. There is a kind of distance that exists from which is easier to describe things. Also, there is a different perspective that you are bringing, which kind of mixes with an already kind of mixed cultural landscape. It means that some of that can be written. There is a refreshing take or perspective on the world, as a result of the process of going to a new place and remaking a life there.

Gaamangwe: If we are talking about dislocation and places, you grew up in London and originally come from Zambia. How do you navigate belonging to two places?

Kayo: I think that it's just a continuous process of improvisation. I think all identity is improvisation; nobody is just one thing in any point in their life. All of us wear different hats and different situations but I think having different cultures and heritage gives you a different range of hats.

Gaamangwe: What are the speakers in your poetry communicating?

Kayo: I don't really work on the basis of having something that I want the speakers of the poems to communicate. I try to work on basis of association, so that whoever is reading or listening to the poem brings something of their own experience to the poem. I don't even believe it's so important that what I am trying to communicate always comes across, as long as something is communicated. I mean I have things that I had in mind, but for the people that read or listen to the poems, they may be more intelligent, well-read, and more experienced than I am, and they may bring something to the poems that I didn't realise was there, and for me that's the fascinating process. I don't know if I want to communicate in that direct way than I would write something that is clearer in terms of communication. Actually I think in the space of poetry, you can communicate with clarity, as well as being more mysterious and by virtue of that mystery, you can access something deeper. In the line of poetry, you might hear or read it but not understand it immediately yet you feel it in some way. But when someone is trying to communicate something to you, you might not understand it or you don't want to understand it, and so its message ends there. With a poem, you can communicate same message, in lots of different ways, over a number of years, and still be finding new things.

Gaamangwe: I have always thought that even if you don't mean to, unconsciously there are some things that seep into a work. Perhaps the objects/subjects of fascination for your psyche. I mean, it's not like all the time, people seat and say: I am going to write about what it means to belong to two countries. But even without meaning to, it can come up.

Kayo: Yes, the poems are made when the poet doesn't seem to know what the poems are actually about. But the reader does. Sometimes they come and say; oh this is the poem about a friend that you lost, but you have written about walking in the park or something. So for the poet, for them, they might have just written a simple poem but for the reader lots of stuff are going on, which is what I think I aim for. More than one layer in the work.

Gaamangwe: Is that influenced by how you perceive yourself? Do you think of yourself in that layered sort of way?

Kayo: Yeah, I think the layered notion of a person is most truthful to me. If I am going to write something that's honest, it's going to be multifaceted in that way. So yes, I think that's what is really behind that. The truest expression of myself is layered.

Gaamangwe: That's interesting. I think I have been thinking a bit on straightforwardness when thinking about selfhood. I mean yes, all human beings are complex, but a lot of us, we tend to fall into the trap of trying to label our selfhood in some way, and try to navigate the world with those labels. Thank you Kayo, and all the best of luck with Brunel International African Poetry Prize and your poetry.

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