

From the Catbird Seat: Season 1, Episode 5

Conversations with African Poets and Writers

Introduction

Anne Holmes: Welcome to “From the Catbird Seat,” a poetry podcast from the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. I’m Anne Holmes, the Center’s digital content manager.

If this is your first time joining us, here’s what you need to know: On this first season of the podcast, we’re exploring some of the Poetry and Literature Center’s signature events from the last five years, and bringing on some special guests who can shed new light on those events. All of the event recordings you’ll hear this season are available as video webcasts on the Library’s website.

The Library of Congress launched its “Conversations with African Poets & Writers” series in fall 2011, which features readings and discussions with emerging and established writers from around the Continent of Africa.

In November 2016, the series featured poet and editor Kwame Dawes, born in Ghana, who, in addition to reading and discussing his own work, spoke about his involvement with the African Poetry Book Fund, an organization that promotes and advances the development and publication of the poetic arts of Africa.

Kwame Dawes came back to the Library for another installment of “Conversations with African Poets & Writers” in February 2017, this time for a spotlight on the African Poetry Book Fund. During the first part of the event, African Poetry Book Fund editorial board members Chris Abani, Matthew Shenoda, and Aracelis Girmay discussed contemporary African poetry with Mary Jane Deeb, chief of the Library’s African and Middle Eastern Division. Immediately following, Kwame Dawes introduced seven African poets, who read from their work.

On today’s episode, we’ll listen to some highlights from that event, but first let’s hear from Kwame Dawes, who can take us behind the scenes of that event a bit and also give some background on the African Poetry Book Fund. Here he is in conversation with Rob Casper.

Interview Between Rob Casper and Kwame Dawes

RC: Yeah, maybe you could talk about the relationship between your work as a writer and how that led to the African Poetry Book Fund.

KD: Yeah, to answer that question would be to sort of embark on a rather philosophical discussion about the role of a writer in society. And the truth is I always preface most of what I say by suggesting that not all writers should be expected to, nor do they become advocates or writers or editors or people who promote writing and who are responsible for all that kind of work. I think it has to do with temperament. I think it has to do with experience. I grew up—my father was a writer, but a writer who I think because of circumstances wrote far less than he would have wanted to. He became a major administrator at the Institute of Jamaica, he was the director of the Institute for many years before his

death, and really was somebody committed to, clearly, all his life, to promoting the work of other writers and other artists and to advancing cultural heritage and idea that showed the state to be responsible for its own artistic production, the work that its artists do. And that was the example I saw; I saw him editing the work, the poetry of Lorna Goodison, of which he was responsible for publishing her first collection of poems, *Tamarind Season*, in the late 70s, through an imprint that he started at the Institute of Jamaica, and went on to publish people like Tony McNeill and other writers. So this is something that I've come to take for granted as part of what one does as a citizen in the arts. I could add to that that I'm also a teacher, and a professor, so I'm very interested in the work that is produced, access to the work that is produced. I'm interested in production, in the business of the publishing and so on, and the politics of publishing, the politics of work being recognized in our society as valuable in our world as valuable. So my interest in African poetry is just part of my interest in literature of Africa and its diaspora, but at one point about five or six years ago it became clear to me that despite the wonderful work that Heinemann had done many years ago in publishing African writers and African poets for the last 20 years or so there's just been no consistent publishing of African poetry. There's no go-to place that you could say, "This is where African poets are published." And I felt this was a huge problem, because, you know, you go to festivals and they'll say, "Well, we find it hard to identify the African poets because there are not many books that we can see, you are trying to offer courses and there are a few anthologies but no individual collections." It's just a ridiculous problem, because Africa is such a massive place, it's a continent with multiple countries, and so on. So my goal was to start a publishing system that would then ensure that African poets were published, new and selected collections were put together, young writers had an opportunity and a place and a home for them to develop as poets, and something exciting like that could happen. And so that passion for the success of other people grew out of my own gratitude for the ways other people had helped me as a writer. So the two things are related, in one sense, that I just think it makes sense that if I have been a beneficiary of the generosity of the industry and innovation of other people that I should do the same for other writers. And so this is how the African Poetry Book Fund came about.

RC: Right, no, that's great. And I remember in that November 2016 event, when you finished having on the stage the collections from the New-Generation African Poets chapbook series, and how visually arresting that was to see what that meant after an event—a reading and discussion, where you talked a lot about your own work and then segued into the Fund, to then see this wonderful collection of books in the African and Middle Eastern Division's reading room, and I think that kicked off or that gave us a great way to transition into the event the following spring (the event we're talking about). Could you talk about both promoting younger writers through the chapbook series and the book prizes that you're also running concurrently to promote the slightly more established poets from across Africa? How those two complement one another?

KD: Yeah, so it is true that one of the great moments for me is and always has been, and certainly was at that time at that interview and that talk, was the fact that we have these beautifully designed books, and to get those box sets where we publish one every year, with eight to 12 as yet unpublished in full length collections, African poets, it's a fairly elaborate exercise because we find these people through one, our First Book prize, which is the Sillerman Poetry First Book prize for African Poetry, and in that

one we only select one winner. But it occurred to us, reading the entries, some of the top entries, that there were a number of really exciting emerging poets who could benefit from some attention and some publication. So we then decided to start looking at those shortlisted poets to consider for the chapbook series. We also became very closely involved with the Brunel African Poetry Prize in the UK, run by Bernadine Evaristo, which I've judged since its inception about three or four years ago. And they, too, identify a wide range of young poets. This year I think they had about a thousand entries from, you know, all of Africa, so then we draw on that list where we ask those poets who we think are very interesting and exciting and we form a list. And then there's a network of poets and writers around Africa that I write to every year and say, "Is there anybody interesting that you see doing work? Can you send me their details, their contact information. And then I spend a lot of time going through all of this work, and then we send an invitation—a wild and crazy invitation, because we give them two weeks to send us a 30-35-page manuscript of a chapbook, and we send it out to about 50-55 people, and then Chris Abani and I meet and select the eight to 12 manuscripts that we're going to publish. So it's a pretty exciting approach, because it draws on a wide range of people. It also gives us an opportunity to do good on our promise to support the writers who enter our contest, who stay in touch with us, and to work with them. And that's what we do; we work very closely with these writers. We also have the Glenna Luschei Prize, which is a prize for any book of poetry published in the year by any press. And so we offer that as a prize to acknowledge the African poetry published by other presses. So that happens each year—these are usually established poets. So it's a series of, all of these are activists, you know? They're initiatives that are trying to stir interest but also create a product—these published books—and what has happened as a result is many of the poets that we've published have gone on to get contracts with fairly major presses because, of course, the PR and the publicity that our series generates makes people stop and think, you know, "Maybe we should check out this poet." So, all in all, it's really been an injection into African poetry that, you know, we hope to continue.

RC: I'm not surprised that you just talked about the ways in which the Fund tries to connect to and support the community that's already there, and to enlarge the kind of attention that community gets and I wanted to talk a little bit about the makeup of this event—the February 10th event—in that light. It was interesting because we began the event with a panel discussion with Chris Abani, Matthew Shenoda, and Aracelis Girmay, and then moved to featuring some of the winners of the New-Generation African Poets chapbook series. I wanted to talk about what that meant to begin by having those fellow judges and editors for the Fund there, talking about the genesis of the Fund, before then we had the opportunity to hear from this great range of voices that the Fund has helped promote.

KD: I'll be honest with you, I've been involved in many initiatives and efforts and projects in my life, and continue to, but this one has been especially gratifying and I think exemplary, because it is driven by this group of volunteer editors and leaders who are all incredibly gifted writers, hugely busy people, but who have all given their time to be the editors, to be the people who will work with individual writers, to basically, you know, usher in this wonderful work that we do. This is with Matthew Shenoda, Bernadine Evaristo, Phillippa Yaa de Villiers (of South Africa), Gabeba Baderoon (also South African), Aracelis Girmay, John Keene (an amazing writer from the States), Chris Abani, and myself. And, you know, this team is one of the most efficient, one of the most generous teams/groups of people that I have ever

worked with. I can send them a manuscript today and say, “Can I get some feedback on it?” and by tomorrow I’ll have heard from every single person, with clear details and notes on it. That’s how serious they are, and it’s all voluntary. And they are committed to this idea of developing a Pan-African...a sense of African poetry, promoting it, giving it a place in the world, giving it attention, creating a critical discourse around it, and so on. They’re committed to that. Then it felt right that they were the people who themselves are enamored by the work that they are seeing, and energized by it, would start talking about it and essentially become the introductory act before we actually hear the proof, the evidence, of the quality of the work. And for them to have all those poets who all read at this event, was just, I think, the perfect, perfect kind of set up, to be honest.

RC: Yeah, I felt so, too. And you could feel the love in the room in the beginning of the panel, and it was such a great segue to the opportunity for the Library to set the stage for the winners of the chapbook series.

Webcast Intro

Anne Holmes: Let’s listen to a segment of this panel discussion. At this point in the conversation, Mary Jane Deeb asks the editors what they look for when selecting chapbooks for the New-Generation African Poets series. You’ll hear Aracelis Girmay, Chris Abani, and Matthew Shenoda weigh in, respectively.

Webcast Audio Clip 1

Mary-Jane Deeb: And is it, again, I’m off the theme but your conversation is so interesting because I want to continue. Is it something that those poets are bringing in terms of imagery, in terms of language, in terms of looking at a reality which everyone sees but they can express in a different way? What is it that stands out that immediately grabs you and says, okay, that’s someone we want to publish?

Aracelis Girmay: I mean, I’m so—I’m so new so I hesitate to say it but just to somebody who’s been following from outside, I had a bit of anxiety thinking about how to talk today or be a contributor today. And say anything about African writing or poetry because I have trouble saying anything about poetry and I know that that’s something that people still—I’ve heard Kwame, and Matthew, and Chris talk, you know, about how difficult it can be to find any trends. But I’ll say that as a reader, I’m struck by—it depends on each person’s work, right? I’m struck by sound. I’m struck by image. I’m struck—but one of the things that keeps moving me and surprising me especially with the new three books that came out but it’s with all of the books really—is what happens with place, and with ancestry, and lineage and thinking about—I’m thinking of Ama Ata Aidoo writing towards Bessie Head. And so hearing this, getting to kind of listen—put my ear to the door on this communication between poets but also how and I don’t think that this is specific to the poets published by APBF but how many places each poem, each person holds. And at once and all the various ways that Ladan is doing it or Safia is doing it or—and that again, I’m not quite, it’s not particular to this group of people only but I’m struck by the places being held in poems in English because I have it. I had access to that, or heard those exact places or the kohl under the eyes with that. I hadn’t had access to those families outside of my imagination in family and that strikes me especially.

Chris Abani: Just to add to that. I always think of poems as automaton. I think of a poem as a virus. And the job of a virus is to mutate endlessly and to resist any control of it. And this is what these poets achieve with language. Just with language alone. In both Ladan and Safia's work, there is a simultaneity of language where fracture would normally lead to loss. Fracture here becomes a way of multiple embodiment, right. So that what would normally be—there is not that there is not a melancholy but this is what I love about melancholy. Melancholy is not lost. Instead of a bittersweet desire, it's sort of you know, it's like, it's like when you cut yourself and it scabs, I mean, you pick at the scab when you shouldn't and it bleeds but it's such a delicious thing? [Laughter] This is melancholy.

And so, and all of these poems, you know, the way in which Tsitsi's work embodies a thing that you would not think would make sense in poetry. The idea of a zebra clan that exists in western English style poetry, but sustains not only sort of this idea of stripes like the way which a zebra's body is already multiplicities, right. But that these multiplicities aren't in the skin. They're actually on the skin and you know, zebras aren't colored on the hair. It's on the body and can hold that but then use that to talk about simultaneity, about patriarchal reduction but also like a feminist resistance. It's the simultaneity of it all. And it's done linguistically with Arabic, with Shona, with English, with line ends, with blind fractures so that what you end up with are all of these beautiful cartographies that don't amount to loss. They actually amount to a tremendous hope. And that is what we look for and we find it endlessly existing.

Matthew Shenoda: Yeah. I'm just going to add very briefly to that is this is very exciting to me. I actually—one of the things that I find most incredible is the way that this newer generation of poets has embodied their complexity as a fundamental part of their humanity and as kind of broken out of certain modernist traditions around the notions of identity and honing these things. And what this has done for me in particular, I think about this as a professor of contemporary and Anglophone poetry. This has fundamentally shifted poetry, period, right? It has changed the way that we relate to language, right. And of course, they're not the only ones who have done this, right. There's many traditions of, you know, Native American poets and other poets who have kind of moved through that. But the way that it is shaping the English language is very exciting to me. So it's almost like a new English.

Webcast Segue

Now that we've heard from the editors, let's hear from some of the voices they're celebrating. We'll listen to four poets from the event—Chekuba O. Danladi, Safia Elhillo, Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, and Hope Wabuke. Make sure to watch or listen to the full event as soon as this episode is finished, so that you can hear all seven poets. For now, here are Chekuba, Safia, Patricia, and Hope, who you'll hear in that order.

Webcast Audio Clip 2

Chekuba O. Danladi: All right, I'm going to start with a poem called "Salt, Alum." You can touch me. I've been so good. I have been especially still, all this time, each of my palms made a bed for your untucking. Me, the meal made from reused chicken grease, eased and always saying yes. Gender is cunning; the ruination unwitting -- a stolen position. I have been bent over, the beast dug out of me, the jewels. Pleasure light pops the eyes, obsidian sticks in the throat, even this body doesn't register. The knuckles

fold towards Lake Michigan, the gut hardens, oxalate builds in the kidneys, the tongue is a grateful peasant. For a beating I can answer to a middle name.

Webcast Audio Clip 3

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley: This poem is entitled "Too Many Chickens Are Coming Home to Roost." Let us open the doors. Let us lift the shuttles over the threshold of the doors. Let us remove the bars from the doorposts. Too many chickens are coming home to roost. And it is not the storm. It is not the August or September hurricane. It is not the storm that's driving home all the angry of heart, all the hate that like aged-tar or broken pavement has lifted onto the roads. And now too many chickens are coming home to roost. Let us open the doors not to let them in. Let us open the doors to let them out. Do not turn down your lights. Do not go to bed with your eyes closed. Do not let out your young sons. Do not wander into unknown places. Do not listen to the wind. Too many roosters have come home to drive us away from town. We who came running from the fires of our homelands are now being told to flee again. Too many roosters have come home to roost because it is not a thing we can hold in our safety. It is not a thing we can place a finger upon to sooth away hurt. It is as hard as a burning stone, as hard as pain as an open sore.

Webcast Audio Clip 4

Safia Elhillo: "A Brief History of Silence, or the Last time Marvin Gaye Was Heard in the Sudan." True story -- just kidding. At the musician's club in Omdurman a singer is stabbed to death for playing secular music. The month before, a violinist on his way home is beaten by police, his instrument smashed to matchwood. All the bars in Khartoum are closed down, all the alcohol in Khartoum poured into the Nile. A new law forbids women from dancing in the presence of men. Another bans song lyrics that mention women's bodies. And at a party in Omdurman, lights strung among the date palms, my not-yet mother, honey legs in a skirt, opens her mouth, and the night air is the gap in her teeth. She sings in the lilting English to a slow song while bodies around her pair off and press close. Before he is my father, my father smokes a cigarette and shows all his teeth when he laughs, wants to ask the dark-gold girl how her English got so good, what the words mean, and could he sing something sometime into the gap in her teeth. But first, police arrive, rip lanterns from trees, and fire a shot through the final notes of the song. And tonight, my parents do not meet.

Webcast Audio Clip 5

Hope Wabuke: This one is called "Refugee Minds." And my son had a playdate with one of his little friends and we was talking to her mom and she was telling me about the banyan tree that grows in Hawaii and I never heard of it and it's the tree that grows up and then its roots and limbs, instead of going outward, grow back down into the ground and then it grows up again. And that image stuck with me and said exactly what I needed. So I have to thank my son for choosing really wonderful friends who have really wonderful moms who give me poems.

So "Refugee Minds." They thought believing would be like the banyan tree rising to spread wide, branches turned down become root again, grow new life. But there is work that must be done to connect deep and strong inside alien ground. You must speak. You must let yourself be known by these new children and all your glorious tangled mess of becoming. Your culture also. Burrow down deep in

this. Else for there are always storms coming. Rootless, apart, you break. And my last two poems, very quickly, this one is "Naomi." When grandmother listens, my mouth is alien, foreign waters lapping at a foreign shore. I have only the language of her conquerors within just one small island. Kuhu [assumed spelling], Kuhu, her name repeated become a song. And my last poem I wanted to read for you, "Slow Dance with Bullet." Again, felt like I'm here in this town so I needed to read this poem to you. "Slow Dance with Bullet." This is when you become political. This unarmed black boy shot, this white killer cop not charged, but given three months paid vacation, plus \$1 million in thanks for this job well done. This happened yesterday, too, the day before that. They used to say this, "Dance, nigger, dance, and empty their guns laughing." This was their theory. If you can rise fast enough, the bullets would not hit your feet. This, the weight of five centuries that did not break your back. This, you are scared of, then. This, you stiffen silent and bored. This will happen again tomorrow, different city, different dead black boy body, but now, the straw needle. Oh, how your baby boy loves to dance. His legs, though, are little. He could never jump high enough. Thank you so much.

Conclusion

Anne Holmes: Thank you for joining us on "From the Catbird Seat." To learn more about poetry past, present, and future at the Library of Congress, visit us at loc.gov/poetry. You can watch or listen to the full events featured on today's episode by going to loc.gov/discover, and clicking on "Video Webcasts." We'll be back next week for another episode. Stay tuned.