



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Nick Makoha.

(Music)

The Amplify Project, Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper.

And I'm Pauline Walker. We created the Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page and screen about their lives, work and artistic practice.

We've really enjoyed these conversations, we hope you enjoy listening to them.

(Music)

In this podcast, we're in conversation with Nick Makoha. Nick is a poet and playwright. His poems have appeared in the New York Times, Poetry Review, Rialto, Poetry London, TriQuarterly Review, Boston Review, Callaloo and Wasafiri. His plays have been staged in Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, London, Manchester, Nottingham, Somerset, and New York.

Pauline Walker Welcome to the Amplify Project, Nick.

Nick Makoha Good to hear you.

Patricia Cumper I'm always curious about who becomes a writer, so the first question I'm going to ask I think is, could you tell us a little bit about you as a child? What was your family like? What role did words play with your young life?

NM Erm, I think I...What I know of myself now looking back is that I love language I realise, in all the tongues I've spoken. So, at one point in my life I spoke fluently in four languages—my mother tongue and two other African languages which was Samia, Luhya, Swahili and also English, and I realise now that I just love the sounds of words. Even now, even when I'm hearing another language I don't understand, the words sound like music to me. That's point one. Point two is I read a lot to my mother, I remember my mother, even my father, because they didn't live together, I always remember them reading to me. But more importantly which I realise now is that my mum, even though she would never admit it, and doesn't even think so, she's an excellent storyteller. So, she has a way of telling you something that makes you kind of...it's kind of like a...it has a cliff hanger,

and then she does this thing where she goes...she will say something like, "Yeah, that's what happened." So, you're like, "What, seriously?" So, in your mind you're thinking, "No way, this never happened," and she will go, "Yeah." So, I think she's just a natural storyteller. She'd either be telling stories to me or she just would have friends in the house, or she's telling a story down the phone, and even though I'd be like maybe watching films or something, hearing my mum's stories in the background, I realise now they probably had an impact on me. But as far as a writer, I realise now I was always a writer, it's just that I never understood, like what you now would assimilate as writing, I just assumed that that was part of the human condition. I assumed writing poems, wanting to read, putting your thoughts down, it wasn't until I realised actually, this is something that is actually part of my personal condition that I need to do, and I need to make it part of my outward identity as opposed to just my internal identity. I don't know if that answers your question.

PC Oh, no, it does perfectly, it does. How does that get formalised? When did you start to write poetry? And the killer question is, when did you call yourself a poet?

NM So I think there were many transformations of me into a writer. So, there's what I've just told you, but also my mum says, which I never remember, but my mum isn't a liar. So, she says that I wrote a book of poems when I was eight years old, and it was so good, she was studying at SOAS at the time, she showed it to her professors and they're like, "Who wrote this?" And she goes, "My eight-year-old son." Because she was trying to get it published, to her it was that good, I don't remember that. But also, I wrote my first poem when I was six, so I remember being in a primary school in Camberwell, and it was the first time somebody said to me, "Hey, let's write a poem." And I just took to it like a duck to water, and my mum's framed that poem and I realised that was my first outward identity as a writer. I didn't know I loved language then. And then when I was in secondary school, I went to a boarding school in Kenya, I just gravitated towards English language and English literature, it just seemed so commonsensical, so everything was beautiful for me. Shakespeare was amazing, anything I was reading. I remember my English teacher saying to me the way I was answering questions, it was as if I was an A level student, when I was studying my O levels. And she said sometimes my answers were too deep. I always find that strange, I didn't understand that. Now, I realised, that was just my writer self showing itself.

PC When did you first claim the title of poet? Because for me poetry is almost the most difficult form because it is so intense and every word has to kind of fight for its place on the page. So, when did you say to yourself, "I am a poet."?

NM The first time, it was actually bestowed upon me by accident. So, in that same boarding school, because I went to several boarding schools, but in that boarding school I had a maths teacher, because I kept moving around the world and I found assimilating into life quite difficult because you're always having to lose your friends, you're usually moving away from a parent or loved one, and that uprooting takes a toll on your mental and spiritual and physical health, so I always felt like I

was always catching up. And when I was in this boarding school, it's called Imani School in Thika, in Kenya. My maths teacher was the first teacher to kind of take me under his wing. He got my confidence up in my first grade to improve my maths but he died of a heart attack just suddenly, and it crushed me. And I remember when we were told the news that day, it broke me, and I remember crying under a tree. And I didn't really know the guy apart from school, I only saw him in school, but something told me I had to do something to honour his...who he was for me, so that evening of prep, we were supposed to be doing our prep, I was in tears and I was writing him this poem, and I must've been in such a trance because I didn't notice the world around me. And a girl in our class, she kind of pulled the poem out from under me because she must've seen I was crying and they took that poem and put it into the year book, and all of a sudden, I was...I became the school poet. So, the first time I was called poet, it was bestowed upon me and then they will take me to schools to recite poetry, to recite Shakespeare or it would be in church and we've just had communion and then they'll say, "Hey, do you want to recite a poem?" And, yeah, so that was the first time. But the first time I- I used to go to- when I was in university, I didn't really enjoy my biochemistry degree, so I used to go to the Weekend Arts College in Kentish Town, and there I studied drama and singing. But we used to do a showcase at the end of the year, and rather than do a drama piece or a singing piece, I did a poem, and I think that's the first time I identified myself as a poet. Yeah.

PW You've said that you've moved around a lot and you left Uganda when you were four. So how did you come to represent Uganda at the Poetry Parnassus as part of the cultural Olympiad in London? How did that come about?

NM The Southbank Centre invited me. I think it was the now poet laureate, it was his idea to do the Poetry Parnassus, Simon Armitage. I think I was quite a young poet at the time, I just...I think I'd only just finished the last collection of the invisible man and my first pamphlet. Up until that point, even though I identified as poet, I never really wrote about Uganda because I didn't speak in my language anymore. So, my mum was my kind of my only real attachment to Uganda, and everyone else I knew spoke English, and my mum...she was a single mum, and she was a working mum, so, conversations with my mum dwindled. And so, I always felt like an imposter as a Ugandan but it was a friend of mine of now Nat Dodson, Natalie, she was the one who said to me when she read the Lost Collection of an Invisible Man she goes, "This is a story of a person who was an exile who misses their homeland." And it was only when I read it again from that vantage because you always read it as the writer. But when I read it as the reader, I was like, "Yeah." Almost every poem is calling out to Africa but specifically Uganda. And I guess other people must've seen what, at the time I just thought were just poems I was writing from my head. That's how I got chosen.

PW What was the experience like, actually performing it?

NM You know, I think then I was still quite fragile in my identity as a poet but it was an honour, representing Uganda, Africa in general but Uganda, but also I think it's very hard as a...I mean, I say

this, you know, I don't think people understand it's hard to keep on as a poet because the relationship that the world has to poetry is that either it's just easy or it's simple but I, probably more than most, I made it into a career. So, I didn't just- it wasn't just something I did, and then I had another job, poetry is who I am 100% of the time, it's what earns my money. I think being there was an encouragement for me, performing my work because also I got to meet a lot of other African and Black writers from other countries, and that was inspiring just to sit next to them, I think to them it was just like, "Oh, we're doing this thing." But to me it was like, "Wow, look at this, other African writers." And to me, I took it like a blessing from God, or like a sign from God to keep on.

PW We're now going to hear a reading from Nick.

NW [Reading 'Psalm' from *The Lost Collection of an Invisible Man*]

PC I don't know why, I just absolutely love that poem. (chuckles) I think it's a generosity of it, the kindness of it that's so lovely and the rhythm of it. You're a poet as you say, in your very core you're a poet, but you're also a playwright. What's the difference in the forms to you? Do you prefer one over the other?

NM Oh, there's a lot of difference. Yeah, I had to learn- I mean, I took a dead end into becoming a playwright but I thank that accidental route because I think it improved me as a poet. I think the difference is, a play happens in the space or a black box, so a play is a field for the imagination. So, you are using words to stimulate the audience's imagination, and you are using dialogue...both of them are story generating machines, but theatre requires this field called the imagination, it highly depends on that, and what you have to learn is how to tell it through that specific lens. I'm not saying the poetry doesn't but I would say theatre is the master of the imagination. But doing that, when you...what you learn from theatre, when you reverse engineer it back into poetry, is that every good story triggers the imagination at some point. So, if you're watching Star Wars and you suddenly realise...because I was saying this to my friend yesterday, so Star Wars, what you never realise is the story happened way before we existed so you're thinking, "Oh my God." So, this technology existed before we were here, then what happened to us? That's the imagination, so the story suddenly seems plausible because it's happening...it's almost like technology is happening in reverse, and that is the little secret that is happening before we even get into the story. That's what theatre...theatre does that, it takes you across different spiritual timelines, physical timelines, historical timelines, it bends reality, and that's the power of theatre specifically, and it makes us do it in a shared space. That's also the other power of theatre, so, I'm not just imagining by myself, I'm imagining with others in that room and that combined imagination is what makes theatre so amazing.

PC The Dark is based on your experiences fleeing Uganda, that's a very personal space from which to create something. What was that like trying to bring something that was deeply personal onto the stage? As a playwright myself, it's a little more comfortable when you're creating a world in imaginary characters, so I guess I'm curious about how do you apply an editorial eye to what is your life?

NM It's difficult, you have to just get your ego out of the way which is one because you're always either trying to protect yourself- your natural instinct is to protect yourself or to protect the ones around you or at least to not lose...because you're revealing other people's truths and your own, because that is- or versions of their truth. And that currency, that currency can quash your emotional relationships so you have to be careful. So, that was hard, one layer. I think also the other layer, you have to learn where the story is at. So, even though things actually happened, not everything that happened is necessary for the story, or not everything that happened is as interesting as you think to make a story. So, that's where you sometimes, need to sometimes either reinvent what happened or tell it in a different way to make it work. A play is almost like a ticking time bomb, it has a shelf life. If it's an hour-long play, you've got to be able to import a certain amount of information in that hour, it's like, "What do I need to do to keep you in a seat for an hour? What do I need to do to transform the way you thought at the beginning in an hour," or an hour and a half, or whatever the chronological device is.

PC You used a lovely quote at the, almost the first speech, about the power of storytelling which is something I completely, completely understand.

NM I think my biggest learning which I- so even now as I- because when I leave you after this, I think I have another interview, but then when I leave you after this my daily practice is learning story. So, whether I'm studying poetry or studying my next play or whatever, I'm learning a story, it is the greatest gift that God gave us, it is how we- how I identify as a man, as a human being, as an African, it's the stories that are told about my people, and those stories are our technology. It's not the phone, the phone holds the story. It's not the book, the book holds the story. It's not the film, it's the film that holds the story. So, our greatest gift or the greatest gift bestowed upon us is the ability to tell and share a story.

PC Because we're creating something from nothing and that's just magical in itself.

NM Yeah. I mean, it's not a coincidence that the first word in the bible and in the beginning was the word, in the beginning, like that's what brings everything into being, so it's a word to world fit, the word says it, the world exists.

PW I read that you were a creative entrepreneur in residence at Goldsmiths, University of London. What did that entail?

NM So there was this project that was run by a company based in London for creative entrepreneurs and basically what they offered was, you as an artist can work alongside a university around an idea, and an idea that was floating because one of the things I do...what helps me create work is I distil my process, in other words, I figure out what am I doing, how am I doing it? How can I maintain it? Because it's easy to be either be disheartened or to lose focus or to lose direction with your work. So, the thing I was studying was this thing called metics and I found a way to kind of develop into a project so metics are resident aliens, so I'm an example of that. In England, I'm not English enough for many various reasons. In Uganda, I'm not Ugandan enough, and that imbalance or that feeling of imbalance can sometimes paralyse writers who are from other spaces because you never feel truly at home in the place that you dwell in or truly, or you feel detached from the places you're from. And this is something that T.S. Eliot experienced when he moved to England, we celebrate him as an English writer but he was actually an American writer, and how he dealt with it is that he over time, he jettisons his American self and becomes more and more English, and that's not something I necessarily wanted to do because I wanted to find a way to harness both worlds, and that was the project I did. So as a creative entrepreneur for a year, I interviewed other writers that were metic or that I identified as metic scientifically like Kei Miller, Malika Booker, Anthony Joseph to find that because I- even though we share similar traits, I wanted to find what were those traits, but also what were the differences and how did it help them write the work that they did and in many ways it also helped me write and finish Kingdom of Gravity. So that's what my job was. It was working alongside the English department Maura Dooley and Joan in the African literature section of Goldsmiths and I found that very useful and it encouraged me actually to go and do an MA the year after. Yeah.

PC That concept you have of being other and in several spaces, I've always looked at that because I was brought up in Jamaica and then came here, as what we call liminality, that space between the sea and the sand where the sea washes, where you're neither one thing or the other, but it's also in the degree I did, it's a very powerful space, because being neither...

NM It's very powerful.

PC ...Yeah, being neither you can release all sorts of things that could not be if you belonged either to the sea or to the land. So, yeah, I completely understand what you mean about holding two worlds but actually occupying a sort of...not marginal, but liminal space.

NM Yes. I mean, in a way, what seems like a weakness is the strength is what you're saying because it's a standpoint, so at this distance, I get to understand English, the way English do not understand themselves. I also get to understand my Ugandan-ness and my African-ness at that vantage point

because I'm not part of the central society, I'm part of the outer society. I'm at a standpoint where I can see things that they might not see and that's the power but initially you feel like an outcast, but actually what you are is you have the advantage of...you have that seeing which is what is necessary as a creative, what you see and what you hear dictate what you can write.

PW You mentioned Malika Booker earlier, I believe you're part of the writer's collective that was called Malika's Kitchen along with Malika and Roger Robinson. Can you tell us how that helped develop you as a writer, as a poet?

NM Yeah. So, this is actually something else I did when I was at metic, so when I was doing a creative entrepreneur study...and I'm still kind of studying that now. I believe all great kind of other literature is formed out of collective so even...so Malika's kitchen is a kind of collective that Malika and Roger set up because what they realised when they were young poets is that if we're going to continue being writers, we need to develop, we need to learn our craft, so we wanted a...Malika wanted to create a space where we interrogate literature and poetry but she didn't know where that was, so she just decided to make it her house, so it became, as people of colour do, it started with a meal. So, people would have a meal first and then we would read poetry and then we would write poetry, so we would...Roger and Malika would bring things that they'd been reading, we would interrogate the text, and then we would, from what we've learnt from the text, write our own poems. And that's pretty much what Malika's kitchen continued to do and then in the first days it was crazy. When we think of it now, I don't know how we did it. Malika's Kitchen went on every Friday for about five years in Malika's house. Yeah, so it would start around 7:00, finish about maybe 9:00, 10:00, and then after that we'll either go for a meal again, we'll go to the...or the theatre, I mean, not theatre, like the movies because it was in Brixton. It was crazy. I don't know how she did it, I don't know- I think at some point a conversation was had because we used to have this thing where they would honour the person who had developed the most each year. So, one of the members was Peter Khan and what he would do is he...he went back to America and what...he taught in a school in Chicago, he would invite whoever was the most improved writer to come and teach in his school for a week and do workshops, so that happened to me I think twice, I was the most improved writer, so Peter Khan said to me, "Nick, you're getting a lot out of kitchen. What are you going to give back?" So, at that point, we started changing the leadership. So I think I led kitchen for about two years and we changed the model so it became a three term entry, we had to reduce the numbers because there was too many people, so it came about 16, 12, to 16 people, and they had to be subbed, sub is not full...because it's technically a free thing but what was happening is that people weren't attending...because it was every day, people weren't attending, and what we wanted to is we had to keep it going, because it's supposed to be this self-generating space for creativity and for, as you both pointed out, a space for otherness so if you're feeling that you're in the margins, Malika's Kitchen should be a space for you. And, yeah, right now we're just about to have a new anthology that's just about to be released called Too Young, Too Loud, Too Different.

PC I do think collective activity gives you a kind of scaffolding around which to build your talent really, it's...

NM And we, I would just say, like Malika, we couldn't be- if there wasn't the Caribbean Arts Movement, if there weren't people like- all Black creative organisations are part of why Malika's kitchen was able to exist, even now myself setting up this writers' retreat Obsidian[inaudible 00:25:55] I wouldn't be able to exist because of...without all that, everything that...things like Stuart Hall, the Black Arts Movement America, they're all spaces for neutrality where the black body can exist without threat. Malika Booker was the first person I know to attend a Black Poet Writers Residency, Cave Canem in America, in Pittsburgh. And she encouraged me to attend, I attended it, it's a programme where you, once a year you...once you get accepted you have three years to do a one week retreat at the University of Pittsburgh with anything between 30 to 50 other black poets, and we both attended, also Raymond Antrobus attended it. And when I finished my term, I did it in from 2013 to 2015, when I finished my term, one of the things they ask you is how can you give back. So, I definitely want to always support Cave Canem because...and it's set up by Cornelius Eady and Toi Derricotte, I always wanted to give back, so anything I can do for Cave Canem I will, but more importantly what I realised what they had in America, we don't have that same space here in the UK. So, I had wanted to set it up back in 2015 but many things kind of got in the way. As I mentioned I was doing the creative entrepreneurship, I was working on the metic theory where I wrote this manifesto about what metics are, and then I finished my book the year after. And then after I finished my book, I was just exhausted because I'd also...oh, yeah, by the way, I was also writing the play *The Dark*, so creatively I was in the red zone. So, once I had a year to rest and then we got into Covid, and then what happened to George Floyd, that really upset me, I was angry, I was tearful. And the night that that happened to George Floyd, Raymond Antrobus rang me up and he said...because we'd been...I'd been speaking about it for five years, he rang me up and said, "Nick, what are we doing?" And at that time, I just called it Cave Canem UK and that was the name, we just decided...I said to him...we had a conversation for about four hours that night, I just said to him, "Look..." As we ended the conversation, I just said, "Look, get back to me in a week. If I haven't done anything about this, I'm not the man I thought I was." So, within a week I set up a website, a Twitter, Instagram, and then I just set about finding the tutors and finding money to be able to set up a yearly weekly retreat, so we had our first retreat last year, and I'm literally right now as we speak finishing the application to start our second-year retreat. So we worked with 50 poets, over 130 applied, and what we're hoping to do is be sustainable because I think that's the weakness that we have in Europe, in the UK particularly. Everything that we set up for our Black bodies aren't sustained, they're somehow dismantled or just because they've done a few years they feel like they've...the system assumes that it has achieved its target but we need sustained support and I want to be a sustained...this organisation wants to be that sustained support for Black poets.

PC Yes, and I like the name of Obsidian, as well, it's Black organic glass forged in the hottest temperatures on earth, so, yeah, I think it's absolutely perfect. You wrote and performed in your one man show, *My Father and Other Superheroes*. Could you tell us a little bit about how that came about and the difference between sort of performing your words rather than having somebody just read them off the page?

NM Yes. So My Father and Other Superheroes, when I was writing Lost Collection of an Invisible man, that was my pamphlet, and I was working to writing a full collection, and that's what I was geared towards but Stratford Theatre Royal in Stratford, that they had an artistic director called Dawn, and she had this idea called Spokelab that she set up with the T.S. Eliot Foundation when Roger Robinson...and basically it was just a space so we'd meet every month, and we'd just do theatrical exercises, myself, people like myself, Inua Ellams, Kat Francois, and a few other poets. We'd just...there was no fee in it, it was nothing, it was just a creative space, and then over time we started...we'd have conversations, we'd have interviews, and then they'd give us exercises, we'll meet again in a month, and we did this for about a year, and then out of that, Inua Ellams wrote his show the 13 Fairy Negro Tales, out of that came Kat's show, and I started just telling the story about my life. Initially I had this idea of calling it Milestones but actually what was forming was My Father and Other Superheroes, and I think I'd just become a father at the time, and I realised...well, my door was what I...I really didn't know what being a father was like because I didn't live with my father regularly, I lived with my mum, or I'd been in boarding schools. I only stayed with my father in about one or two years of my early life, and then for two years when I was...when I lived in Saudi Arabia. And so, I was at a Stacy Makishi workshop and I remember her saying, "Whatever project you're working on, you've got to think of this really snazzy title, and in that workshop, I came up with the idea, I'll call it My Father and Other Superheroes. And once I'd got the title and just as I got that title, Spokelab, I said, "Look, we want to take the three most devoted of you to work on shows," and those that were the most devoted were myself, Roger Robinson and Kat Francois. And so we did this...again, it was, they gave us money to kind of do a scratch, we decided to make full shows, so we made full shows that were shown on the theatre stage to 100 guests each night, so Kat's show on the first day, my show on the second day, and Rogers on the third, and that's how it came about, and they invited the industry towards it. The Arts Council came, the British Council came, and they said, "Look, Nick, we would love for you to apply to turn this into a proper one man show." And that's how I started, but I haven't planned on...I hadn't even planned on doing...I didn't even call myself a script writer at that time, I was just doing exercises just to keep my creative juices flowing.

PW Can we go back to some poetry now and have another excerpt of your wonderful poetry from Kingdom of Gravity.

NM Sure. [Reading 'Self' from *Kingdom of Gravity*]

PW Can you tell us a little bit about this poem and why you wrote it? Why it was included in this collection?

NM So whenever you're from somewhere else that doesn't readily fit into the west end version of the world, people always ask you. "Where are you from?" The thing it does is, it's almost like it

erases the self as if where you're from doesn't exist and in many ways it's kind of the first embers of the play that would become *The Dark*. I remember first- one of my earliest memories is my mum and I being interrogated as we enter Heathrow Airport and what I realise now in hindsight is this constant lack of belief of the story of the immigrant, particularly the African immigrant or the Caribbean immigrant when they tell their story, so that tell me that story again is them, where you from, I don't really believe where you're from. And then conversely, it's like every story that we're told about white existence, we're just supposed to take it on face value, that's exactly how it happened, this is who we are, this is where we came, that's how it came about.

PW I know we've spoken before or you've spoken a lot about your progression as a writer, so from your first pamphlet which is the *Lost Collection of an Invisible Man* which was in 2005 to the *Kingdom of Gravity* which was in 2017, what do you think you've learned about yourself and your writing, and how you've developed as a poet?

NM One, well, I'm constantly learning, and what I've learnt is that the best place to be is in a state of learning. There is a danger to think that once you get to certain milestones, you have to do less, but actually you have to constantly create the environment for learning. That's one. Two, I've learnt- this is an analogy I use, I call it the mountain analogy. So, every time you write any piece of work, you have to start at the bottom of the mountain. So, the bottom of the mountain, things are quite easy, altitude is fine, the weather is okay, you could probably just walk it. It's not going to take much toll. As you get higher up the mountain, your fitness has to improve, you have to wrap up, and all those are versions of what you have to do with your craft and your creativity. So, what I've learnt is whenever you're working on a project, you have...when you climb a mountain, you can't just assume, "Well, I climbed it last time so I'll be good this time." Everything has to be learnt again and the more willing you are to do that, the better...it doesn't guarantee you'll get to the top of the mountain but the better it will be so I'm always trying to, you know, as I start a new project, I'm always trying to say, "Okay, it seems quite easy at the beginning but how..." And as the mountain nears, it gets smaller and smaller, so you have to get more and more focused as you get to the top, you have to get more and more skill as you get to the top, you have to equip yourself with the right materials as you get to the top, so what I've learnt is, is you have to be humble enough, to be willing, to start at the bottom of the mountain every time you work on something new.

PC In the British system, being invited to appear at the literary festival is kind of like public acknowledgement that you're a writer of note. So, I'm kind of curious, what role does appearing at literary festivals play in your sort of career development, and how have you found the audience's reaction to your poetry?

NM It's always an honour to. I mean, it's necessary, it's the way that parts of the world see you but the thing is, is a lot of times at these festivals, there's not enough... In comparison to the amount of writers, there's not enough spaces for not just Black but just other bodies, so a lot of times it's the

same faces in the same spaces, so it's... And I know, it just doesn't- it would be like- imagine going to a, I don't know how to do it, it's like if every bird that we saw was a flamingo, yeah, we know that there are other birds, we'd wonder why can't I see any other birds, and so as much as I appreciate as a bird being in the sky, if all I'm seeing is flamingos, I know that something is being engineered as opposed to allowing us to see what's actually there. And so, I just- I appreciate festivals, I just sometimes feel that they're not- I don't know, but sometimes they're just not diverse enough or they're just pulling from the same flock.

PC How did the audiences react to your being there? I mean, because you're likely to be different maybe from many of the (overlapping conversation).

NM I mean, it depends what festival you go to. If they promote you well, it's fantastic and they come and see and they enjoy it. Sometimes, you don't get the same promotion as other people so they don't know who you are so they don't know that you exist and that's an issue because... But I mean it's not something to complain about, it's just something to be aware about, it's just how they do it, they have their flagship writers who are all over the Guardian, and then they have yourself. And if your event isn't promoted or if your event isn't something that they're identifying as, "We're glad to have this person." I think that is changing now because of, I hate to say it, the George Floyd effect where people are realising that they had a blind spot but, I don't know. I don't know if I'm answering your question but I've been to festivals where they've said, "Yeah, we're coming," and they put us in a room right in a corner where nobody turns up and then when...in that same festival a few years later, they put us...Roger and I did a gig there and people are saying. "How come we never heard about this gig? This is the best gig that we've seen." So, you can only attribute that to people are doing things the way they are familiar with but that familiarity often is at the detriment of our people of colour.

PC Yeah, yeah. I mean, I found that in theatre as well that frequently Black work was seen as a loss leader, that they did as a kind of sort of kindness and that they had things that were...that they always went to but I do feel that that's changing and it may be...yes, it has a lot to do with George Floyd. And I guess I asked you that because I'm curious as to how a poet makes a living, it seems so esoteric.

NM I don't know the answer to that, I have to first of all thank two entities, I have to thank God for always providing me something to do. I also have to thank, I mean, my wife in allowing me to be in this space, and also taking a lot of our parental burden, and keeping that connected. I think... I say this in humility, is that to be...to be able to carry on as a writer, a gift is being able to be in your right mind because when you're in your right mind, in other words your whole faculty's working, it's easier to sit down at your desk and write. But if you're struggling or you're stressed out, it's very hard to write. I think that's part of it. I think also I'm probably wired differently to other people, I knew if I set myself a back door, I would take it. There's this martial artist called Ido Portal, he's

from Israel and he says that we live in the age of bliss, so if we can live where we are attracted to comfort, so if you create a comfortable situation, you will not push yourself. I try to constantly make... It's kind of like being on a high wire with no safety net, so it means I have to take every step seriously. And if I stand still, there is no progression.

PW So before we go to the next question, maybe we should go to our last reading which I think it's the Beatitude.

NM This is one of my favourite poems, it's one of the poems that made me realise that this book was going to work or it made me realise that I have a book in that is worth pursuing. It's kind of what I call my anchor poem. [Reading 'Beatitude' from *Kingdom of Gravity*]

PW That's so beautiful, I just love the line and the phrase, "When the bodies disappear, discarded like the husk of mangoes." Your imagination is amazing. (chuckles)

NM Thank you. Yeah.

PW You've won a number of awards. What does it mean to you to win an award?

NM I mean, it's humbling. I mean, right now we're in Olympic season. I guess it's a recognition of the hard work that is put in because writing is kind of like being a duck in water, nobody sees what you're doing underneath, so when you're recognised for an award, it kind of takes into account all those long nights, that reading, the research. So, I mean, I wouldn't say I play for awards, what I'm playing for is to write, the best book I can write, in other words to be spent so... When I was writing *Kingdom of Gravity* I'm trying to drain the tank, what do I really want to say about Uganda, about my people. When I was writing *The Dark*, what do I really want to say about how my mother brought me up, I'm trying to tell the best version of that story and I guess what the awards do mean that people kind of identify with, "Wow, look, this is doing something," that, A, we haven't seen before or, B, has been shown to us in a new way, so I guess... And it also encourages you to carry on, going back to the analogy of both the mountain and the tight rope, it encourages you to keep moving because it's very easy to convince yourself to stop or to procrastinate or to resist, so awards kind of help you want to keep going.

PC I'm going to ask you to do a little horizon scanning first now. What do you think the future holds for you and your writing? What would you like it to hold? And just look a little wider, what do you think it holds for writers in the UK perhaps and maybe in the world?

NM I mean, well, right now I'm working on my second poetry collection but I would definitely like to write, A, more plays and, B, films. I believe I have that capacity. What I hope is that we actually start seeing... Well, no, not even I hope, I can tell you right now. Kwame Dawes said it and he was right, and it's more so now I'm seeing what he saw, is that the best writers, even if they're not as skilled as they could be, but the best stories are coming from people of colour, particularly women of colour, right? And they don't always have the resources, so what I hope for the future is that we actually start, A, nurturing such writers, and, B, actually seeing their stories in film, in theatres, in books, so what we saw like with Bernardine Evaristo, the lady who wrote the Shadow King, these are amazing writers and they're women of colour, and they're telling some of the most interesting stories, so I want to see those things in film, I want to see those things transformed into theatre because our currency is our culture, so that's what I'm hoping for the future. And when I actually see that needle bend, and not revert back, because a lot of times it bends and then it's reverted back to the old status. What I hope is that it bends and it moves in a positive direction.

PC Yes. And I have to say that reading your work, it is so intensely visual that I think film is a sort of natural home for you so I, yeah, I hope that happens, I really do.

NM Thank you, I appreciate that.

PW And to our final question, what are the best things about being Nick Makoha?

NM They might not think it but I think it's being a husband and a dad. I don't think I'm- I'm probably the most strictest dad but I love my kids and my wife is...I think she's amazing, I really appreciate... I say this in a polite way but Black womankind, so that's one. Again, to be a writer and doing my passion, I realise a lot of people are not in their passion, so I get to live in my passion daily, and I think that's a gift from God. When we were inside of this Covid, I think the simplest thing is just breathing. The times I used to wake up and I could hear myself breathing, and I tuned into it, and I burst into tears and I was just appreciative of the sensation of breathing, something that we just neglect. I don't know if that's too profound but that's what was first.

PC I think profound is exactly what we need right now if we're going to survive. I think, yes, that's a wonderful message. Nick, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us. It's been moving I have to say and it's been enlightening and, yes, I expect to see you on film very soon.

NM Thank you, I appreciate you.

PW Thank you.

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