READINGS AND PANEL · NYBALF 2025

A Daughter's Geography

Lebo Mashile, Mahogany L. Browne and Malika Booker in conversation with Titilope Sonuga

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Named for Ntozake Shange's poem "A Daughter's Geography", this panel brought together three poets whose work crosses continents: Lebo Mashile of South Africa, Mahogany L. Browne of Oakland and Brooklyn, and Malika Booker of London, with Titilope Sonuga as moderator. Each opens with a reading: Mashile a poem on what a woman's heart is made of, Browne a three-part piece written for Sonia Sanchez's birthday, and Booker a poem on the women who hold a Caribbean wake together while the men play dominoes.

Asked to chart the map of their survival, Mashile speaks of migration, language as a lifeline and post-apartheid South Africa; Browne of sharecroppers who left Louisiana for Oakland, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and the poetry that paid for a house; and Booker of the names given to her in London and Grenada, a childhood in Guyana and the Windrush generation in her blood. The conversation moves through Malika's Poetry Kitchen, writing for children, and Mashile's account of feminism as first principles and of Black women as both overburdened and flawed. An audience question on artificial intelligence draws three different answers, and the panel closes on rituals for recovery.

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Introduction: A Daughter's Geography

TITILOPE SONUGA 0:07

All right, good evening and welcome. My name is Titilope Sonuga and I'm simply here to help us guide the conversation along. Ntozake Shange's poem, A Daughter's Geography, which this panel is named after, is a map of survival. It's part testimony, part lament. Shange is tracing the fractured layers and fiercely connected geographies of black life, particularly the lives of women and children across the globe. She offers us a poetic cartography of how black people, daughters and sons, scattered by colonialism, slavery, and war, remain bound by memory, resistance, and an ancestral inheritance that just simply refuses to be erased. I'll be speaking with three women who are themselves institutions and testimonies that span continents. Women whose voices and stories and song have laid the path for generations of young voices to find their way with them.

We will trace this cartography of survival, the geographies of struggle, of ritual, of radical solidarity. Through this conversation, we will name and celebrate black women as the life force of our collective liberation. Lebo Mashile is a South African poet, playwright, performer, recording artist, and activist whose work has defined the landscape of contemporary poetry in her country for over two decades. Born in the United States to exile South African parents and raised in Johannesburg, Mashile's artistry bridges continents and histories blending lyricism with fierce social commentary. She's the author of award-winning collection In a Ribbon of Rhythm and Flying Above the Sky and the creator of acclaimed stage works such as Venus vs Modernity. Her voice has graced books, plays, music, film, and television, consistently amplifying feminist and Pan-African narratives.

Honored with numerous awards, Mashile continues to expand the boundaries of spoken word, most recently through large-scale performances that fuse poetry with music, visuals, and technology. Please welcome Lebo Mashile. [Applause] [Applause]

2:50

Reading: Lebo Mashile

LEBO MASHILE 2:50

What indestructible substance is a woman's heart made of? The heart must be a vulva. Bleeding, stretching, contracting, connecting, fertile, infertile, birthing, dying with each lost lover, orgasm, an unborn child. Life hands us these hearts without insurance. At the heart of owning property is owning women. Neither land nor sea nor sky, animal, plant, patent or crown can be owned without conquering [expletive] Once we made love as the seasons make rains and harvests unowned when we worshiped sun, moon, wind, stones and stories. Respectability and forgiveness are concepts sold to black people and women so that we do not fight for power with the same ferocity with which power is taken from us every waking day. There is a cross burning between your legs.

They sell Jesus as a placebo as if a revolutionary master would ever endorse pay as you go churches or the asinine [expletive] done daily in God's name. You die slowly making life easy for what is killing you. Two, this is not the motherhood of pink and blue ribbons and fluffy toys. This is not an ad for women who worry more about washing powder than they do about finances. This is not an exaltation of asexual mammies who only know dicks and darkness that won't claim them in daylight. I am not a nurse maid [expletive] teacher quasi spiritual koratu ape with maternal instincts who will slowly comfort you into truths you cannot accept. How long have you been [expletive] your mother?

Sideways over and above the myth sold to girl children of baby dolls that breed without genitals and Barbies that of baby dolls that breed without genitals and Barbies that something. I waited for Prince Charming to save me for so long I forgot to be my own hero. I will teach my children to believe in opposites. If you can live in their world, they will hate you. If you chase their approval, you will hate yourself. If he hits you, hurts you, hurls your heart against the wall. It is because he does not understand the relationship between blood and consequences. It's not your job to teach him. Nobody claps for martyrs. They will build a shrine upon your pain and say they did it in your name. Rather go mad because this 3D world is just an asylum for truth tellers. [Applause]

TITILOPE SONUGA 6:12

Reverend Dr. Mahogany L. Browne, a Kennedy Center Next50 fellow, is a writer, playwright, organizer, and educator. Browne received fellowships from Alley Arts for Justice, Air Serenbe, Baldwin for the Arts, Cave Canem, Hawthornden, Poets House, Mellon Research, Rauschenberg, Wesleyan University and Ucross. Browne's books include A Bird in the Air Means We Can Still Breathe, Vinyl Moon, Chlorine Sky (optioned for a play by Steppenwolf Theatre), Black Girl Magic, [Unclear: Band Books], Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice, and Woke Baby. Founder of the Diverse Lit Initiative and Woke Baby Book Fair, Browne currently tours Chrome Valley, highlighted in Publishers Weekly and the New York Times, and is the 2024 Paterson Poetry Prize winner. She holds a an honor honorary doctor of philosophy degree awarded by Marymount Manhattan College in 2024.

[Unclear: God help me] is the inaugural poet in residence at Lincoln Center and writes across genre as a resident of Brooklyn, New York. Please give it up for Mahogany L. Browne. [Applause]

7:28

Reading: Mahogany L. Browne, for Sonia Sanchez

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE 7:28

Thank you. I love that we are speaking towards Sister Shange and I want to share a piece that I wrote for Sister Sonia Sanchez's birthday two years ago. It begins with a cento and the second part is a dissertation cuz I you had to get some use out of that MFA and then I close with root workers. It's a three-part piece for Sonia in three parts. One, forgive me if I laugh. You are so sure of love. You are so

young and I am too old to learn. Can you tell the morning stars, the air so sweet, river dark with sound, speech, and breath? Can you tell the stars and the ocean? She is a holy one leaving trail of witnesses smiling.

Amen. A woman. Our braided spaces glass gone mad. Yellow razor thin light. Shiny sugar and pure woman conceal a symphonic shutter. A thousand sermons. Conjugated pain. Wild stars. Southern eyes bloom in the night. We taste the blue midnight. Stars between my teeth. Black magic is you. Caught in my voice is a wild sea. Love shifts the air and we blossom black. Picture a woman. Her spine, her rotating the earth, her leaning into our birth cloud eyes, jumping rivers, inhaling moons. Imagine her free. Two. I ain't known I was worth the snarl and spit, this name, this black girl gone, black woman arrival. I ain't never known I was worth fighting for until I read a Sonia Sanchez poem.

Three, we roll up sleeves and bend from the knees. We sing beneath our breath. It's going to be heavy. We still swing big despite the justice system of let down. And we still show up on time. We arms open. We hands open. We hearts open. And we love the way we fight. Until empty, until sun replenishes, until laughter fills the well. We return to the front line. We hammer. We hatch it. We ready and ready to love a life. We ready to rock a stone cold gaze into dust. The black girl you watched harassed is someone's daughter. The black woman you watched bered is someone's daughter. There is no redemption and swinging out of your weight class.

There is no glory in the demise of our black women. We be the daughters. We be the bridge makers. We be the pot servers. We be the cleanup crew. We be the aunties. We be the writers. We be the spell weavers. We be the holiest of holy. We pray for you. We double-edged women. We gather like a fist. We gather like a fist of freedom papers. We a coal of storm and glory. We a country surrounded by ghosts. We pray for ourselves. We watch our sisters pray for we blessed in this knowing. We black palms open and up. We black spirit and divine. We ain't never been steel bars. We ain't never been glass ceiling.

We ain't never shuck. Nah. Nah. We sauna. We sauna. We saunter the testimony. We clean. We clean. We clean the spirit. We manifest. We manifest. And we ain't leaving till we choose. We be the daughters. And we got root work to do. [Applause] Thank you.

TITILOPE SONUGA 11:43

Malika Booker, a British poet of Guyanese and Grenadian parentage, lectures at Manchester Metropolitan University and co-founded Malika's poetry kitchen, a writer's collective. Their anthology, Too Young, Too Black, Too Different, poems from Malika's Poetry Kitchen, celebrates MPK's 20-year anniversary. Her pamphlet Breadfruit received a poetry society recommendation and her poetry collection Pepper Seed was shortlisted for the OCM Bocas Prize and the Seamus Heaney Centre 2014 Prize. She has published with Sharon Olds and Warsan Shire in the Penguin Modern Poets series, Volume 3, Your Family: Your Body. A Cave Canem fellow, Complete Works fellow and inaugural poet in residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Malika was awarded the Cholmondeley Award 2019 for outstanding contribution to poetry and elected a Royal Society of Literature fellow.

She is the first woman to win the Forward Prize for best single poem twice, The Little Miracles and Libation. Please welcome Dr. Malika Booker to the stage. [Applause]

12:57

Reading: Malika Booker

MALIKA BOOKER 12:57

Hi, good afternoon everybody. How's everyone feeling? Can I ask you a favor? Could I ask everyone to just move up some seats so that it doesn't feel like we're speaking to like empty seats in the first two rows? So that it's nice and cozy.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 13:15

Yes, doctor. [Audience laughter]

MALIKA BOOKER 13:22

Oh, thank you. That feels so much better. Thank you. So, I'm going to read my poem.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 13:34

Yeah.

MALIKA BOOKER 13:35

Are women at funerals versus the domino installation. And it uses two quotes. It uses two quotes from Caribbean poets. One from Dennis Scott, the women breathing like a black apostrophe to pain and the other one from Jean Binta Breeze. Held him the way Caribbean woman does righteous son with a drum beat him back. So this is two accolades to those poets. It is always women as if they are the holders of culture, the activists who can tell you what hymns to sing and what happens on each day. Who are industrious in the kitchen, cooking rice and peas, saltfish cakes, slicing bread, baking cake, seasoning chicken, and rocking babies. Whilst our men mostly sit around the table like an installation, fingers curled around ivory dominoes.

Regularly, one would push back his chair and stand up, step back to slap his last domino down with might, bouncing the tables load with his winning shot, then sit to shuffle the pack to deal again with much old talk. Throats arched to knock back hard rum while chatting old-time stories about the dead. How, as they sit, my aunties, like invisible worker bees, replenish empty bottles, exchange dirty glasses, refill sauces with sweet biscuits, heap food would magically appear in front of each man, even in dead house, making him feel like a king in a country that only wants to see a beast in him. These women are a black apostrophe to pain. See how they contain, hold on, pass on, hold in, know what is expected, how to bathe the body, dress the dead like they're alive so they leave this world with dignity.

How they contain, feeding and feeding those bodies in grief. They are our institutions. The way they curve and curve their bodies like small brackets. She tells me how she curved her back to help her boy when grief drag him down in her front room. His first funeral service and how it hit him snot and I

water hard. Held him the way Caribbean woman this rice son with a drum beat upon him back. Held him as he bawled. Rocked him. This big man she bought into the world like the baby she cradled at birth. And she contained. She shushed. She shushed. She rubbed his back, patted, contained. These women are our breath, our oxygen, vital for our survival. These proud upright spines, how they crack and straighten under all this lead dead weight. Thank you. [Applause]

17:07

Maps of survival

TITILOPE SONUGA 17:07

Thank you so much. Now I feel we are truly situated in the room. Welcome. A daughter's geography ends with the following lines. There is no edge, no end to the new world. Because I have a daughter, Trinidad. I have a son, San Juan. Our twins, Cape Town and Palestine, cannot speak the same language. But we fight the same old men. The same men who taught who thought the earth was flat. Go on over the edge. Go on over the edge, old men. You'll see us in Luanda or the rest of us in Chicago rounding out the morning. We are feeding our children the sun. So, as a way of understanding your journey here in whatever order you want, maybe we'll start the way we came in.

Can you chart for us the map of your survival story? How you arrived here to this work with the benefit of hindsight? And I know this is going to be hard to abbreviate, but try. What were the landmarks across the way that made it that you were always going to arrive at this work? What ancestral inheritance? What memory? What geographies? What do you pull into your work today?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 18:20

What a question, right? What a question. Was that a poem? Oh, you first.

LEBO MASHILE 18:38

Migration. Being an eternal outsider, existing across language, existing across identities, being a child of immigrants. Finding having to find a vocabulary outside of language because I didn't speak English and because in my house we spoke Sotho and language was coded not as I didn't understand language as a concept. I understood that there was there were grouping there was a group groupings of words that I could only say to certain people. So language wasn't like language. It was just a tool for people and then finding other tools for people. Laughter or painting or color or dancing. Teachers, shitty teachers, great teachers, racist schools, code switching, migration again. The cultural revolution of post-apartheid South Africa. Introvertedness, isolation, being a bookworm, hiphop, the cultural revolution of post-apartheid South Africa.

The connective tissue between language and other art forms, language as a doorway to theater, to media, to film, to the world. Yeah. Language as a visa, as a lifeline. Y'all paying bills with language.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 21:00

Amen. You the end. That's good.

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE 21:07

That dismount was right. Paying bills with language. I come from sharecroppers that moved from Louisiana to Oakland, California. And then they birthed my father who was a firstborn hustler. I did not realize until talking to my mother that I guess the first poem that he introduced me to was Dolomite.

TITILOPE SONUGA 21:34

Oh wow.

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE 21:35

But it makes all the sense in the world. I guess what found me in poetry was it was the one space where I was allowed to speak and no one told me to be quiet as a girl, as a black girl and as a child. I didn't have to stay in my place when I was sharing a poem. And in turn, I realized that I guess my grandfather was a poet, too. The way he told stories, most of it sounded like, oo, he did a lot of singing while he was talking over coffee. But if you read Chrome Valley, you'll like you can hear you can hear them in that. So, I come from the sharecropper turned, the migration.

They moved from Louisiana to California because the Klan was after him and they had eight kids, seven survived. My father met my mother and I think my first poem as a young person memorizing it for school was James Weldon Johnson. But then I left poetry alone for a while because again I was told to be quiet. It's not yours to speak about unless this poem or this book wasn't in my hand. What brought me to New York was me running from home. Running from the place that told me to play small and be quiet and I landed at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. I ran it for 13 years. Well, I came here as a journalist.

Quit that job after a lot of misogyny. Word to hip hop, love it still. But then started the Nuyorican in [Unclear: 2006 or 2007], stayed there for over a decade and just learned what poetry can do. In turn while at the Nuyorican, I went back and finished my degree. I got my MFA and started touring the world, which is where I think we first met. London. My first tour was in London. Word. Where does it find me now? Yeah, poetry pays bills for sure. Poetry bought a house, put my daughter in school, paid for her braces. Poetry also saved my mother's life because again, I'm a child of sharecroppers that turned to, these migrated people that had to figure out what hustling meant in Oakland, California.

It was hustle or revolution and I have a lot of hustlers in my blood. So I guess it also made me it made me use the skills that they taught me but for something that would make me whole rather than take from me.

TITILOPE SONUGA 24:40

Thank you.

MALIKA BOOKER 24:42

That's a question. That's a question. So when I was born, my mother and my godmother thought I look like an angel. And so my godmother went looking for a name that would kind of encompass me. And she found Malika, Swahili. My grandmother was Pan-African. And she found this name. But at the same time, my grandmother in Grenada had a dream that I should be called Sharon and sent this letter

saying she had a dream that I should be called Sharon. And my mother said that she knew she would have to send the birth certificate back to my grandmother to show proof. So on my name I'm Sharon on my in officially I'm Sharon Malika Booker but even my mom if you say to her can I speak to Sharon she wouldn't know because she was my name is Malika my grandmother's the only one who calls me Sharon and I feel like that's a poetic beginning this in the 70s giving your children African names in Caribbean what do I come from I come from adventurers I come from a mother and father who left Grenada and Guyana when young and came to the to Brixton in London and met and married and did nursing.

My mom did nursing, my dad did an engineering degree. And my mom is the kind of person who she'll get a nursing qualification and then think I need the next one which I think I got from her. So I think the Windrush pioneers are in my blood. And then when I was born, they felt like they couldn't bring up a child in racist England. So they took me to Guyana. And I was there till I was 11 and came back to England. And so I've always been kind of like an insider outside, not Guyanese, not Grenadian, British, but not British. And I think being outside enables you to kind of be able to see the world.

And my mom said to me one day, she said, "Actually, you're the first generation of women able to make a choice." and I think being in Guyana, I would go to school and we would go in the rum shop and we would play these music on the jukebox and we would sing along karaoke to the music on the jukebox. But being there I was aware of just how men treated women in the society. So wives would come and brawl with sweethearts and outside women and these men would be drinking not really caring the world about this drama that's happening. And I think all of that shaped me coming back to Britain to a kind of pan-African first generation British cousins, moving from kind of like the older child in the eldest child of two girls in the Caribbean and coming to be the youngest child of all these cousins.

So I've always been kind of decentered and I think all of that shaped me. So, it's no coincidence that my poems are always centered around the Caribbean woman and the Caribbean became this kind of imaginative space that I could write from. And being an a nerd, being a bookworm, books were my world, but I didn't see myself in them. I didn't see myself in the Enid Blyton. I didn't see myself in the William Blake in the poems that I was reading and writing. And so when I discovered Shange and when I discovered Jamaican poet "What a joyful news, Miss Mattie," I feel like Louise Bennett when I discovered those poets there was something I wanted to continue in the tradition and write in honor of them so I think those are that was a question Boy, that's a question to stop and I think I hope we answer this.

29:03

Malika's Poetry Kitchen and the next generation

TITILOPE SONUGA 29:04

You did. You did. I'll stay with you for a second, Malika. In your poem, Death of an Overseer, you say, "Oh, now he dead. Life sweet like ripe sugarcane and children's laughter fresh like spring water." And there are in those lines this beautiful image of this next generation who are a wellspring of promise

beyond the overseer's roving eye. We know that it is the women who carry the recipes, the songs, the prayers across oceans, who are the knowledge keepers, who remind us who we are. So talk to us a bit about Malika's kitchen, about the rituals that you invented as your investment in this next generation of people.

MALIKA BOOKER 29:46

Jesus, [Audience laughter] these questions. So I'll start with the poem, the overseer. Actually one of my mentors is here, Kwame, is in the audience. And one of the things that I remember him speaking about is not writing to the ordinary, not writing. And so I remember writing the overseers lament. And I remember reading all these books from all these overseers diaries and their gaze on the woman, black women's body in the Caribbean is pretty awful and appalling. And I thought about something Kwame had said and I thought about how do we transcend that? And I thought about dancing on someone's grave. I thought about the joy of dancing and trotting on those graves. I think one of the things I'm fascinated by growing up in the Caribbean is wake is the ritual of wake.

Is the ritual of how the wake turns from sorrow to the prayers on a certain day to celebration and partying at after the burial and that transition. But also I'm really interested in what happens. I love any art or installation art I do always has a table. I love the idea of what happens around the table when you eat together when you pray together. And so I think Malika's kitchen poetry kitchen was born of we had attended these workshops by this amazing poet who had won the forward prize called Kwame Dawes who's sitting in the audience and he had left and I was feeling bereft and I was saying we should have this all the time.

I sit in my kitchen with this poet called Roger Robinson who is always the instigator of me going down roots. Who is a do I will procrastinate and think. And I said I want a place where we eat food and we kind of share poems and we have we craft and we learn our craft in this space. And he said well let's do it then. I said oh well when do we start? And he said next week. And I said well what do we call it? He said, "Well, we're in the kitchen. Call it Malika's poetry kitchen." And I said, "So, what are we going to do?" And he said, "Well, June Jordan has this book and we'll use that as a blueprint and also the workshops that we did with Kwame Dawes."

And that's how Malika's poetry kitchen was born. And every I thought it was going to meet once a month. And then I was shocked like the sec the first week it was just one poet and Roger and I. It was terrifying for the poor chap. But the next week we just got people and then everyone said, "See you next week." And so every Thursday I had to tidy my house for these fools to come in to my home. I didn't know it was going to last 20 years. I didn't know that the amount of people who would go through and actually the testimony to it is and the I suppose the knowledge of it is more from everyone who's gone through putting it in their bios and speaking about it than kind of Roger and I really I think.

33:08

Writing beyond grief, writing for children

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 33:08

Yeah.

TITILOPE SONUGA 33:08

Thank you. What a testimony to reaching beyond yourself and investing in generations to come. Thank you for that. Mahogany, do not make grief your god, you say. You and grief walk side by side, hands not touching, but featherwise close. The light tips its full cup everywhere. There's in your work this insistence on softness and resisting this idea that grief is our only birthright. In your way making through all the genres that you defy. There's this awareness that someone has to do the work of clearing the path, but also show us how to travel it and preserve our souls and preserve the souls of generations to come. What does it mean to you to write from a place beyond grief and to recognize that our children can be written into this dream of the future?

I say this to explain my long-winded question. Woke baby I mentioned to you is a book that I read to my children and I'm curious to know when in your journey you thought there's a generation beyond and we have to write them into a better future.

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE 34:14

So after I moved to New York in two 1999, I tried everything that all poets do after the open mic, after the slam, you're just trying to find an anchor because when you realize the slam scores are it or the that one time at nationals is it, you want to figure out like where does the work really happen? And in 2003, I began teaching at Urban Word. 2003. Yeah. And that was it. That was like I think that was the spark for me. So teaching young people that you can do poetry and it doesn't have to exist in the slam capsule. It can just be a poem at the senior citizen home. It can be a poem that you read to your sibling before they go to sleep.

But you have to be showing up for the poetry to exist so that we can speak, right? I think I really was afraid of children's literature and ya. I did not start doing like actual poems for young people. I was just doing my poems with my big old age. And these little kids, they're going to have to get that work. You going to have to figure out what that word mean, babes. That's I was just doing it because I felt like that's how I learned. So, I want to at least extend that to them where you can figure it out if we just talk about it. But I started thinking about writing just for YA and children's lit specifically after a friend Jason Reynolds also a poet but a phenomenal YA writer as well said you should just write in this sector in this genre.

And I said I curse too much. It's not going to happen. They gonna take they gonna kick me out of school you know. And he said no I promise you the kids are cursing. The kids are having sex. They know more than you think. So just write the book. And that's when the second moment happened for me. So first was teaching those young people in 2003 through 2013. And I went I taught any and

everyone kindergarten little son people which is yeah I think they're preschool went up to first grade. I think the British Arts Council had us in grade schools. Primary you call it. We I would do any and all, but I never just focused on what would the book say if they picked it up and I wasn't there.

So when I had that time to do that, woke baby came. Chlorine Sky happened, Vinyl Moon happened. But it required me to be sat and learn that poetry is bigger than just one stage, one award, one list. Even the fellowships we get in, poetry is bigger than all of that. And if I just use poetry as the tool that I know it is, then I never have to wait for anyone else to open the door.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 37:08

Amen. Amen.

37:12

Women as cartographers

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 37:11

Amen.

TITILOPE SONUGA 37:12

Lebo. I feel you bracing. Don't brace. There are generations.

LEBO MASHILE 37:19

I have jet lag. Oh my god.

TITILOPE SONUGA 37:21

Poets that exist across the continent because of you. Through your life and your work, there's this insistence on remembering on naming the women who turn the tide of history, but also naming the women who are quietly doing the work in their houses. In Requiem for Winnie, you say, "Men give women their names. Women give men's names meaning. Men carry this wealth out the door as they are leaving. You paint for us this picture of women as both present, invisible, amplified, silenced, Mary Magdalene. Talk to me a bit about women as cartographers, these maps we are writing, our lives, our leadership. Why is it so important for our collective liberation even when we are flawed, even when we are broken? Why us? Why now?

LEBO MASHILE 38:26

I think growing up as a little kid with a big butt and a funny name when I finally cracked English and I finally realized that okay, school is about school is kind of like bartering. It's a system, like my parents wanted good grades. If I brought home good grades, people were happy with me. These teachers didn't really like the fact that I was loud or they didn't like the fact that I was funny or they didn't like the fact that I they didn't like the fact that I was smart either and I found that if I could crack the code of school and make people I get the marks from the teachers and give them to my parents then everybody would be happy with me Right.

But I also realized that there were things that I was in doing that, in ticking the boxes and in serving, the master. I was saying things that weren't true. I was saying what was right to get the answer that I knew would get me the result that I needed, but it wasn't the actual truth. The truth was that what my parents were telling me at home about black people was not what I was learning at school. The truth was that there was a tension between the fact that my mother was, this really educated, empowered woman, an activist, but came from a deeply misogynistic family. There was a truth. There was the truth that my father was a progressive man because he cooked and took my me and my sister to ballet but he also was a man who lacked an emotional vocabulary and he didn't he didn't openly support my mother but he was treated as though he did just because he didn't stand in the way which is a different thing to actually actively being supported.

I saw the tension between how women have to function and perform and the lack of credit that women get for the millions of things that they actually do. I saw that as a kid. I didn't I wasn't the first person in my family to call myself a feminist. You know, my mother was a feminist. I grew up with books by Angela Davis, on in on the shelf. I also grew up with my dad reading books, by Miles Davis and John Coltrane and I would sneak those too and I would I messed up my eyes reading like, John Coltrane's bio autobio biography underneath the bed and, underneath my covers and seeing how these men who my father idolized also did terrible things to women, horrific things to women and that was also part of the idolization.

And then seeing that mirrored with the musicians and the art forms that I loved, seeing I mean I remember I was 15 when Aaliyah came out and I remember how we all thought that it was so wonderful that she was in a relationship with R. Kelly, right? Cuz what I mean? Because we were also being macked on by drug dealers who were grown men and had children our age, right? So, I was navigating all of this stuff like, going to school with these white kids, going to school and having white kids say quota quotota when you pass by in the hallway, right? And realizing that nowhere is safe. Nowhere is safe, you know? So, fir like feminist principles is it's first principles for me to decode everything.

It's first principles for me to decode survival. It's first principles for me to understand the hostility that I faced, when I first started working in South African media. As much as it's the host, as much as it's the first principles that I returned to understand the hostility that I faced when I published my first book and was annihilated by white academia, it's the it's the principles that I come back to understand how hypervisibility for a black woman is a weapon and a tool at the same time, but also is weaponized against black women. Visibility harms black women and but we are sold visibility as though visibility is an escape from so many things from poverty from invisibility.

I'm eternally fascinated by black women. I think black women are an advanced species. I think black women are like iPhone 25. I think black women are doing the heaviest of the heavy lifting. I don't think this world deserves black women. I also think black women are insane and flawed. I also think black women carry too much. I also think black women are conflicted. I also think black women are violent. I

also think that we even at our worst, the generosity that's laced in our spirit. Even at our worst, we are still feeding and healing and nourishing, you know. So I and I guess as I get older as well, I'm becoming more and more comfortable with my own darkness.

I'm becoming more and more comfortable with my own fallibility and my own I think it's that thing like everybody says when you get into your 40s and it's true and I like wow it's all filters kind off and making peace with the fact that all of these selves that I've had to develop have helped me that they are they're living parts of me that have helped me to be able to survive what I have been through and they're valid the depression, the anxiety, the PTSD, all the undiagnosed spectrums, the hood girl, the all of it, all of it, the thug, the all the actress, all of it, all of it is worthy and valid. So I'm drawn to I'm drawn to women who are isolated.

I'm drawn to women who are misunderstood. I'm drawn to women who I'm maligned. I'm drawn to loud, crazy women that other people can't hold space for, you know. I'm drawn to looking for the how humanity seeps out of the cracks of people, you know. I think women's writing is really interesting because the tools that the tools that patriarchy has broken out of men are the things that make women's writing so much more richer and complex. You know, the fact that patriarchy beats an emotional vocabulary and sensitivity and femininity out of men means that there's landscapes that women can access within ourselves and connect to so much. You know, it just it makes life infinitely richer.

Women are analyzing emotion at like a granular nano level that men cannot perceive. Our inner lives are so complex. So, that was a very long-winded answer. I'm so sorry. Thank you for coming to my TED talk. I'm done.

46:00

Audience question: artificial intelligence and the craft

TITILOPE SONUGA 46:00

Thank you. I am an unrepentant fan girl. So, if you leave me to it, I'll just do this all night long. But I wanted to give an opportunity to the audience to pipe in, ask a question, share a thought. This would be a good time to do that. Otherwise, I have more questions. But you Oh yeah, there's a there's a person. Hello person. How are you?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 46:33

Artificial intelligence and also the craft of writing language. What are we going to gain? What are we going to lose? What do you think about that? How do we navigate that space? So

MALIKA BOOKER 46:48

I want to answer that because sometimes when I don't want to deal anything I ignore its existence. And so what I did was I kind of went on AI and I said, "Can you write a Malika book a poem?" Cuz I thought, I'm not going to ignore your existence, but everyone's going mad about whether it's going to

take over from us and everything, so let me see how it does me. It was awful. It had me in Jamaica. It did all these crazy interesting things that were kind of that were kind of like a cliched kind of version of myself. And so I felt which I've always felt I've always felt like if someone plagiarizes me right they're not me.

So I don't I'm not bothered about plagiarism. It's this is really mad. This is really crazy. I've never said this aloud except to friends who think I'm mad because you cannot have a mother and father from Grenada and Guyana. You cannot have the experience that I have. So I'm not in that way. I'm not bothered I'm not bothered about it as a teacher. I mark you in accordance with what you've put in front of me. So what you put in front of me is a kind of amalgamation cliched story or poem. So you'll get the grades accordingly. What is interesting to me is the fact that our work is being used without credit being given to us.

And I think that's where the problematic kind of concept of it arises. But for me it's like when cassettes came in everyone had problems with the fact of vinyl when the music streaming came in I think technology things move but there's something that cannot be taken away from the human element of things and creativity is one of them. So that's kind of like my short answer on that.

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE 49:05

I'm still grappling with it. I went to this conference, this tech conference in Canada and a this AI was introduced several years ago before ChatGPT. So I knew it was coming. I just didn't know what it was going to do. What I did fear at the introduction of this AI technology was how excited the billionaires and millionaires in the room were to not pay creatives what they deserve. That they thought that we could just tap this in and boom, now we have Tom Cruise right here. Now we have Solange right there. And they literally deep faked faces onto people in the audience as they sat. So that is the biggest concern for me is that you think that you can just you usurp or go around paying artists what they deserve.

I think that's the first one. The second when I think about the young people teaching writing classes right now, the first thing I said was y'all just write the paper. Write it yourself. Grammarly can help you. Fine. But if you put the prompts into the ChatGPT to give me the paper, the system is going to catch you. You're going to fail. Just write the paper. I rather you write a bad paper and we figure out how to make it good then you write you give me a prompted paper and you don't even know what it means. You don't even know how to craft it yourself. You don't know what to do if that technology turns off.

So let me help you build the skill set. Let me help you build the muscle so that regardless of what happens online, you still have the wherewithal to speak for yourself. So, I think those two things I'm like, I'm with you in that you can't make me you can't make Mahogany L. Browne again, but who wants to pay Mahogany L. Browne her actual rate? Who wants to pay these artists their actual rate? And that's where I'm conflicted with it.

LEBO MASHILE 51:03

Well, I'm gonna go in the other direction, in the other extreme, just because I can't. All right. I love tech. I love AI. I AI has become my PA, my email writer, my researcher, my house for collating all of my tangents that I think on my AI is helping me to make sense of my ADHD creative brain. It's giving me a storehouse for where I can compile and develop ideas that would otherwise be floating somewhere in the ether and it's allowing me to see the connectivity between what is actually happening in my mind that there is a creative process going on in there. [Unclear: [Unclear: MJ Anton]] was speaking at a conference. He's the American dude coaches black women, black CEOs, and founders on how to use AI as the support system that you can't afford.

So AI is can be your PA, your marketing director, your lawyer, your agent. It's AI, so it's not accurate. You understand? You got to go and check and double check and fact check this stuff. Check it, triple check it, right? But where am I going to be able to pay for a whole team? What are you talking about? I ask AI questions. I ask it to act as an agent. I ask it to act as a manager. I ask it to act as a funder. I ask it to act as an executive. I ask it to act as a business manager. I ask it to act as all whatever kind of professional support system I need.

I ask it to act as that. I also use AI to write my dirty drafts. I do a lot of commissioned work. There's a lot of time where I have to spend, distilling like a whole bunch of information into something coherent. AI helps me to vomit out a draft, a [expletive] draft. Very make it let's make it very clear. It is a trash draft. It is a dirty draft, but is the draft that gives me the beats that I know that I need to hit. Do you understand what I'm saying? It is the draft that lets me know what is essential that what has to be inside of this commission. Then I take that and I make it my own.

It takes the leg work out of having to, what would take me like two days to do in terms of commissioned work if I had to work on it flat out, full out, takes me like a morning. Come on. What do you mean? You go to William Kentridge's studio, he's got 40 people working under there. When the [expletive] am I going to get 40 people working under me? You understand? And I deserve 40 people working under me. I deserve that support system. That's how you build immortality as a creative, right? Let AI be your friend, girl. Do use that [expletive] The other thing is though, there are some very serious questions, ethical questions around land consumption, around water consumption, right?

But I feel that, human beings generally have done a very poor job at organizing ourselves. The questions around land consumption and water consumption are related to everything just about every industry. We do a terrible job at protecting the earth and protecting the planet. Maybe AI can help us to figure out how to reorganize ourselves so that we consume these resources more efficiently. But I think this is a moral, spiritual, ethical, political, economic question that we have to ask and answer about this consumption, right? But we also have to ask it then about our cell phones. We also have to ask it then about food. We also have to ask it then about every other industry that we are dependent on. Right? So I like tech. I like it. I'm here for it.

55:16

Rituals for recovery

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 55:16

Beam me up. [Audience laughter]

TITILOPE SONUGA 55:19

All right. Thank you for the question. We're going to close out in this way. I want to know like for us to be creating anything in this climate is a miracle particularly as black women. I'm curious about and in two words rituals for recovery that prevent you from descending into complete rage. Two words that describe what that looks like for you. Malika go.

MALIKA BOOKER 55:44

I actually put together a playlist during

TITILOPE SONUGA 55:48

That's more than two words, Malika. [Audience laughter]

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 55:51

That's more than two words.

MALIKA BOOKER 55:52

I can't I can't I can only say this. It's a two sentences. I can do that. I think I put together a playlist for during COVID to help me and it's called Malika's Altars. And so every morning I play Malika's Altars with all different types of work. So yeah, that's all I could do. I couldn't get to two words.

MAHOGANY L. BROWNE 56:21

Meditation and coffee.

LEBO MASHILE 56:30

Movement, so dance, lymphatic drainage, yoga, whatever, walking, whatever. And altar, ancestral worship. Yeah.

TITILOPE SONUGA 56:43

Amen. Please give it up for these beautiful women. [Applause] I thank you for your time, for your audience and yeah, thank you for all the things. This was beautiful.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 56:57

Thank you for those brilliant questions.

TITILOPE SONUGA 56:59

You're welcome.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 57:00

You are phenomenal. Questions.

TITILOPE SONUGA 57:02

I did want to say another way in which we support black women is that we engage their books. We speak to them after. We buy all the books, all the things. So, we book them for gigs. We do all of that. So, please go ahead. It's what? 20% off at the table. Look at that. Go do it. Thank you very much for being here and stick around for the next beautiful conversation. I know that's why y'all are here already. I cannot wait to hear you speak. See you soon. Then they laugh in his face.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the automatic captions of the published recording, corrected for names and evident mishearings, and lightly edited for readability. It has not been checked line by line against the audio; the recording remains the authoritative record. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

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Lebo Mashile is a South African poet, playwright, performer, recording artist and activist. Born in the United States to South African parents in exile and raised in Johannesburg, she is the author of In a Ribbon of Rhythm, winner of the 2006 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa, and Flying Above the Sky, and the creator of the stage work Venus vs Modernity.

Mahogany L. Browne is a poet, writer, playwright, organizer and educator from Oakland, California, and the inaugural poet in residence at Lincoln Center. Her books include Chrome Valley, winner of the 2024 Paterson Poetry Prize, Vinyl Moon, Chlorine Sky and Woke Baby. She lives in Brooklyn.

Malika Booker is a British poet of Guyanese and Grenadian parentage and a cofounder of the writers' collective Malika's Poetry Kitchen. Her collection Pepper Seed (2013) was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Prize. She received the Cholmondeley Award in 2019 and has twice won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem. She teaches at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Titilope Sonuga is a poet, playwright and performer, born in Lagos and based in Edmonton, Canada. She is the author of the poetry collections Down to Earth (2011), Abscess (2014) and This Is How We Disappear (2019), and served as the ninth Poet Laureate of the City of Edmonton.

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