CONVERSATION · NYBALF 2025

A Literary Life: Kwame Dawes in Conversation with Matthew Shenoda

Kwame Dawes in conversation with Matthew Shenoda

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Matthew Shenoda, who edited Kwame Dawes's new and selected poems, opens with Bob Marley on Babylon and with Dawes's own geography: born in Ghana to a Ghanaian mother and a Jamaican father, raised in Jamaica, educated in Canada, and settled in turn in South Carolina, Nebraska and Rhode Island. Dawes describes a childhood shaped by his father's Marxism and Pan-Africanism, by the democratic socialism and roots reggae of 1970s Jamaica and by the Rastafari who wanted to hear about Ghana, and a Christianity of his own that he lived as socialist and anti-imperial.

He explains why he has always built institutions alongside his writing, from a theatre company at eighteen to the African Poetry Book Fund, founded with Chris Abani, he says, because of Lebo Mashile; and why the mentorship Shenoda credits him with is better called apprenticeship or inheritance, on the model of the reggae studio, where a singer moves from the road to the yard to the porch before reaching the microphone. He reads "African Postman", from an encounter in Shashamane, Ethiopia; "Coffee Break", from his documentary work on HIV and AIDS in Jamaica; "Satta"; "Before Winter", from his years in Nebraska; and "The Prodigal Converses with the Land", from Sturge Town.

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0:00

Introduction

MATTHEW SHENODA 0:07

Hi,

KWAME DAWES 0:08

How you doing?

MATTHEW SHENODA 0:09

I'm doing good. So, I think what I want to do is begin the bit of conversation about your biography and your life. Ask a few questions about that and then I'm going to ask you to read some poems, specific poems perhaps. But I'm going to begin. Um,

KWAME DAWES 0:26

We can see ourselves right here. That's beautiful. Here. Hello. All right. It's pretty cool. It's high tech. You can't see it, but I can. It's pretty nice.

0:36

Babylon is everywhere: a childhood across Ghana and Jamaica

KWAME DAWES 0:35

Yeah.

MATTHEW SHENODA 0:36

So, I'm going to begin with some biographical information that folks may or may not know. But before I get there, a quote from Bob Marley because why not? Which you'll certainly know. In 1975, Bob Marley said, "Babylon is everywhere. You have wrong and you have right. Wrong is what we call Babylon. I could have been born in England, could have been born in America. Make no difference where me born because Babylon is everywhere. You were born in Ghana to a Ghanaian mother and a Jamaican father who himself was born in Nigeria. Though from Jamaican parents, you lived in Ghana until the age of eight or so, moved to Jamaica through university. After college, you attended graduate school in Canada, then moved to South Carolina, all the while in between, spending a significant amount of time in the United Kingdom, from South Carolina to Nebraska, and now Rhode Island.

The facts of your life, I think, shape a way of thinking about global blackness. So, I'm wondering if you can say a bit more about how these familiar links and personal movements have shaped your sense of an African solidarity under the theme of this gathering. And how you view blackness as a kind of global reality.

KWAME DAWES 2:00

Yeah. There's a peculiar sense in which I'm a product of a time, a product of a certain generation. My father and mother met during the great sort of revolution of independence movements in Africa in Ghana. My father was a Marxist and a Pan-Africanist. So I grew up in a space in which those were the sort of upheavals, those were the things that were dominating the world. I was remembering that there's a story my mother tells of us traveling. We were coming to the states on route to Guyana and my father had a sneaky habit of not traveling with his children. He would go ahead and then my mother would have to manage these four sometimes at some point it was four then it became five kids and we were going through JFK I don't remember it but apparently we were marching around the airport singing the Internationale, "So comrades, come rally, and the last fight" we because my father taught us this song.

This was like a nursery rhyme or like a song to go to bed with. And she disowned us of course at the airport and she didn't know who these black children were marching up and down singing the Internationale. So this norm normative thing I think helped to shape that sensibility. And I don't I'm not seeing it as a I wasn't preco we weren't precocious. We were just immersed in that world. And so the timing of us entering Jamaica in the 1970s during another revolution of an attempt at democratic socialism in Jamaica for 10 years almost 10 years under [Unclear: Manley's] government was defining and it was happening at the same time as the emergence of roots reggae and revolutionary reggae and you couldn't avoid it and it clearly had an impact on the way that I encountered the world and the way that I saw the world.

A combination of the fearfulness of a an apocalypse in Rasta eschatology was about was an end-time eschatology and then at the same time there's a great charismatic Christian movement going around us and sort of entering into our lives and the everything was coming to an end and so on so forth and yet at the same time a return to a connection with blackness and Africanness so being sort of shaped in that space was defining for me and I think I still carry the questioning and the understanding of that circumstance. All I have to do is just trace back at least 150 years back to realize that the engagement between Africa and the Caribbean in my own family line was not simply a product of the transatlantic slave trade, but it continued beyond that. Where my family my grandfather moved to Nigeria and things like that. So that was just part of my um

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6:07

Growing up Pan-Africanist

MATTHEW SHENODA 6:09

Having grown up in a household that was perhaps more overt in its politics around this through your father who himself was an incredible novelist and cultural worker in Jamaica. Did you resist this at all as a youth? Did you resist that kind of Pan-Africanist impulse?

KWAME DAWES 6:28

No, no. No, not even it wasn't a thing. I resisted many things but that wasn't something I it was lifeblood for me. You know I think people don't realize that in 1971, '72 is going to Jamaica in as a kid in elementary school primary school. Jamaica was not as pro- Africa as we kind of think it is now. Jamaica was pretty retrograde. We were teased mercilessly for being African. You can't believe the teasing that my sisters and brothers and I experienced. My brother's nickname was a meaning kill. This is his nickname. I didn't need a nickname. My name was Kwame. That was good enough. I did. I didn't need a nickname. And so and we used wit and irony and deep sarcasm to because it was as basic as are you comfortable wearing shoes or do you live in houses and so on.

So we continued the tradition and we said of course we did and we knew Tarzan. We'd met him he's a cool guy. And we had pet lions at home and so on so forth and yes we lived in trees. Everybody in Africa lives in trees but it was the only way to deal with it. So what so then we I encounter Rastas and the Rastas were the people who had a completely different interest in us in me. They wanted to talk about Africa. They wanted to know what Ghana was like. They wanted to know what fruits I ate and so on. And so that hunger for the Pan-African sensibility was a lifesaver for me was a lifesaver.

And then reggae music began to do its work. But I think it's worth understanding that between 1970 and 1980. Something revolutionary happened in Jamaica. Transformed that whole society that I don't think I don't think we talk about enough. And it had to do with its relationship and attitude to Africa. And some of the work that my father did was he brought people like [Unclear: Samora Machel] with he brought Nketia, the musicologist from Ghana. He brought all these major artists and thinkers and so on so forth. He was the director of the institute of Jamaica to create cultural connections and so on. And I think and he brought Rasta drummers into the forefront when there were events instead of a chamber orchestra.

He pushed this Africanness in the society which was transformative. So for me, there's no way to resist that. And on top of it, the posters that we had in the house had people like Angela Davis. How could I resist that poster, that big fro, that woman, and the movies that were coming out, Blacula and all of that. So, there's a rich kind of thing, but I knew that we were dealing with a change, a transformation. So I never there was no resistance to it but I think my father read I became a Christian so that then my father got worried because he said what are you doing we are Marxist and I said well I'm I got this Christianity thing and but it was weird because I always remember him complaining.

He said he didn't complain that I had this Christianity thing. I think he I think he was concerned about it, but he said, "You keep you're listening to them. Why aren't you listening to me?" And I said, "Never, really, come on. That's not what's going on." So there was that tension, but what I we didn't get to talk about was that my the brand of my Christianity was completely socialist. It was anti-American. It was like Yeah, I've been writing about that today. I was writing about that thought about how it came to me as completely different from American evangelism. Evangelical was being exported and I could see it as part of the imperialist structure which did not necessarily change the core faith idea that was behind it.

For me there was a it was a revolutionary faith. And I can articulate it far better now, but how I lived it was that I didn't see a tension between the two things.

11:22

Building institutions: the African Poetry Book Fund

KWAME DAWES 11:23

Yeah.

MATTHEW SHENODA 11:24

So, you're the founder of the African poetry book fund. Poetry editor for Peepal Tree Press until recently the editor of Prairie Schooner. I don't know if this is public yet, but you've just launched another new book series focused on Caribbean poetry here in the United States. In that vein, your work has sought not just the need, but the drive to want to influence the world of publishing outside of your own writing. Can you speak a bit about this impulse and why that work is seen as essential to you? I can't actually pinpoint a moment in your career where there hasn't been a parallel move of doing institution building. Yeah. Alongside your own writing.

KWAME DAWES 12:09

Yeah. And I think you're right. It started I was 18 when I decided to start a theater company. It but I blame my parents for that. I blame my father for that. My father probably sacrificed his own writing to create publishing enterprises. He started the Institute of Jamaica publishing project which published many books. Published Lorna Goodison's first book, Tamarind Season, published Tony McNeill's poetry, published books on Jamaican sports, and so on so forth. So, it was a series that he did, which seem to make sense to me. Missing. You know, there's a little weird equation that you start to have that says that if you are being bombarded with certain literature, certain writing that elevates a certain culture, then the way to transform it is to one write against it, but also to hijack those mechanisms of how the literature is propagated and it's passed through and creates something else.

So that I think many people find that instinct when they say let's start a new magazine or let let's the old days it was let's get a Gestetner machine and let's just do some printing of stuff to counter that. So for me though, and the other thing that was really important to me was I've never been satisfied with the idea that my singular success is valuable if I'm if I'm a one-off, I'm a one person among I've I've come to recognize and like the idea of an army of people sort of walking into a room, you it's the image of the takeover, the Bob Marley walking on stage saying, I come for B, I come for conquer, the sense that but it's not just me alone.

Enough people behind me coming through. That idea elevates and for me it's always made sense that supporting that kind of work supporting the work of other people is as important as what I do. And I've said this to you many times. I don't think everybody has to do it. And I don't think all writers have to do that work. And if you're not inclined to do it, then it's fine. Just don't block people or don't be messy with people. But it's become part of what I do. And I think it's

MATTHEW SHENODA 15:12

So one distinction there that I think is an important one is that though I would argue that you've transformed many institutions that you've been in. Yeah. That's not your initial impulse. Your initial impulse is to start something a new that lives maybe in parallel maybe in tandem to the institution but independent of it in some way.

KWAME DAWES 15:33

Absolutely. I think that's right. I think we want to control the things that are important to it. So one of the things that you think about writing and publishing is that the what when Chris Abani and I decided to think about this African Poetry Book Fund and by the way label the reason we started the APBF is because of Lebo Mashile, who still won't let us publish her book. What's wrong with you, Lebo?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER 15:58

It's a true story. It's true.

KWAME DAWES 16:00

So, but that's the only reason I agreed to do this to come and harass you. But it was Lebo. We got t we got TJ Dema who agreed finally we published it. But it was Lebo and TJ and we said these amazing poets in Africa need to have the pl their work to be published. But the idea was that 15 years ago if you went to an American publisher anybody and you said to them name an African poet one right? Chinua Achebe. Exactly. And have you read his poetry? Like really? Okay. So no. Come on. Like, honestly, it's nice that he wrote some poems, but like seriously. So, and people literally they would go, I don't know, right?

I don't know. They would say Wole Soyinka, but they didn't know Wole because of his poetry at all. I can tell you that. Right. So what did that mean? What does that mean when major publishers and editors just don't know? And what had said to me was this is no way that they can engage this work not because of a willful disregard of it but because they felt inadequate. So if they were liberal they felt like I don't want to offend. You see what I'm saying? So our task was to say okay we take that out of your hands. We take that job out of your we will acquire. We will edit. We will introduce all these voices and then you just print them and we pay you to print them because you clearly don't know what to do in this territory.

But the point you're making about identifying the fissures identifying the points at which it is not working and then creating the space in which it can work was massively important. So even though yes I agree about the idea of creating something new but it was creating something new that was pragmatically useful. So I'm not trying to start a publishing enterprise. I'm not trying to start a publishing house. For instance, APBF is not a publishing house. APBF is a mechanism to create publishing and to transform the publishing world but with the tools of it the handling of it the management of it the actual testing of it and through to be in our hands to rest it in our hands and therefore because we bring the knowledge to this and I think that's exactly what has guided me and again I'm not saying that's the only model but it was the way to we could say if we did this then 15 years later if you ask that question all of them will tell will name some poets who they've published

APBF is respons it's not that we even they're not published by us but that's how they knew because look all they had to do was go I don't know what to do with this you get two chapbooks and you've got 20 African poets that you can at least read and say Okay.

Well, all right. I know a little bit more. It's not They're not strange. They're kind of familiar. And suddenly you feel you can edit it. It's as basic as that. It's as basic and as simple as that. And so I think Yeah. So that was really important.

19:42

Mentorship, apprenticeship and inheritance

MATTHEW SHENODA 19:42

So I think in tandem with this work, I would argue that your mentorship I don't know if this is a term you'd use, but your mentorship is not a term. I know it's not a term you'd use, but you're going to you're going to use it right now cuz I'm calling it that. Your mentorship, I would argue, is legendary. I mean, Malika Booker cited it earlier today, right? And I think it's been an inspiration to many folks, myself included, and I wonder if you can speak a little bit about your philosophy of whatever it is you call that thing you do with other humans. And maybe what some of the distinctions are for you in that kind of, again, I'm going to use the term mentorship of black writers as opposed to perhaps others.

All of us who work in university settings for example are constantly mentoring students but you do something quite a bit different in the way that you've I think supported nurtured launched people's careers in different ways supported them and on multiple paths black writers in particular and globally more broadly.

KWAME DAWES 20:54

Yeah. I think I benefited from the care of other people who took time to look at my work and to listen to me. I don't call it I never had a kind of I had some mentorship situations that were not necessarily as strictly about writing. It was about teaching. My one of the people that I named her, and I know she's rolling in her grave because I do that. [Unclear: Ellen Arl], who I called a mentor, but she was incredibly This is a woman that white Chicago woman teaching in South Carolina who really took me under her wing to be able to just teach all these comp composition and rhetoric classes. And she taught me a lot, but she also taught me a lot about poetry.

She was a poet herself. But it goes further back. It goes because there were so many people who were kind to me. Whether it was at the creative arts center in at the University of the West Indies which is now the Philip Sherlock Center where the director who was somebody who had been Noel Vaz who had been come alienated from the whole community because he was read as a kind of white Jamaican and somebody who resisted change in that space. But clearly somebody who had done some quite radical work in producing Black Caribbean and Jamaican plays. But he was running this center but he let me use it. He let me bring my plays in.

He encouraged it in ways that were very helpful to me. There were many I can go through many people who showed me kindness and in a sense my feeling was that's how the world should work. But I'll say this Matthew the truth is before I was thinking of being even a writer I kind of had made a decision to be a teacher. And teaching seemed to answer a lot of my concerns about the world, a lot of my concerns about what I can contribute to the world and how things can change for young people and people anybody right and so teaching so even when I was in what we call six forms 16 17 I was taking in fifth formers from different schools and giving them classes on passing their exams just free.

I was just they said this guy knows everything. In fact I remember my I have a legend amongst my friends at school that the day of our major exam the O-level exam we're sitting there and one of the really bright some of the boys were sitting there and so on so forth a couple of them said they hadn't read the book they hadn't read Biswas. So they were like I'm going to fail. I said, 'Well, you're probably going to fail because you got to read at least the book. And so they said, 'Well, tell us what happened. So I told them the whole story of Biswas. And they passed. So it's legendary. I gave them the whole story of Biswas in about half an hour and they passed and they still talk about it.

So I can teach. I'm a lazy teacher, but I'm good. Like I'm a good teacher, right? Because Yeah. So that impulse is part of it. It's that sense that and my mother is a teacher and my grandfather's a teacher. I've come from a bunch of teach my sisters are teachers. My sister Aba was a principal. My younger sister, well, she's older than me, but she's younger is a principal of an elementary school. We're teachers. So, the teaching, I think, is guiding it. It's sort of making it make sense. But there's also a bigger mission. The mission is that African and black people have not been given the opportunities and the access to the kind of training and mentorship and structures that would allow them to develop and grow.

But have been thrown into situations where they're biting each other and they're fighting each other for the same little piece and creating spaces in which that can be taken away and we support each other. The last thing I'll say on this is when Colin Channer and I were thinking of Calabash and we were we the story is that Calabash is this great festival but the conversation about Calabash began with trying to set up writing workshops in Jamaica. That's where it started like trying to do workshops because we had done the African style poetry school in England and it was around that same time that I said it'd be good to do something light on the Caribbean but we didn't have a branding.

We needed something that would be a brand that would then when we announced it people would come to it because we're we're good writers but not really trusted is all I can say. So when we did the festival and Colin said, "Let's just do a big festival and then we use that branding to do these workshops, which worked perfectly." But the important part of it was what was the model we were going to use and we talked about it and we said the one thing that is missing in the Caribbean and certainly in Jamaica was apprenticeship system, a [Unclear: mentoring] system. The system that exists.

MATTHEW SHENODA 26:46

See how he didn't say mentorship there?

KWAME DAWES 26:49

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. That exists in the recording studio in reggae. So we went and we started to look at it and we said if there's a reason why reggae is so successful. The rea is so successful because an artist doesn't just walk into a studio off the street. The artist stays outside on the road first until they are invited into the yard. This is over several months. In the yard, they then called in to bring in some peanuts and so on so forth on occasion. Everybody knows they're there to sing, but they're not getting into anywhere near the studio for a while. And then finally, they get on the porch. They get on the porch and they get more often gigs to go running out and get things and so on so forth.

And then one day they get into the studio not to sing but just to stand there do errands and so on so forth before finally then somebody says o yo you can't sing and you say you could say so how look how long so wait we get a chance but you say yes and they give you the mic right and it was normal for a guy would say I have a song and you start singing the song and a senior musician will say, "Hey, you that junior too big for you. Me take that junior, you can't manage that junior. May I take that junior go work on the next one and right but the point I'm making is you can hear it in the dance hall.

You any D you listen to all the interviews on YouTube, these guys will give you the genealogy of their art. They would tell you which DJ learned from which DJ learned from which DJ before they became this. The problem with writers was that we thought we just emerge born big so and we can just start. So like we didn't come from something and so our thing was create mechanisms for older writers to work with younger see where you're coming from. Create a community that has been the core of the principle of this work. So when you look at APBF and you see our editorial team the editorial team is because it's saying that they are people none of them are gaining like they're going to be published because they with AP.

No, they're there to be part of the that presence that says you are from something. And all the work we're doing in looking at the digital digitalizing work going back into the 19th century and looking at the tradition and so on so forth, it is to say you come from something. You come from something. You didn't invent this thing. You think you made up poetry? You're clowning. You understand what I'm saying? So that's the impulse. And I remain because and I remain committed to it because my god what a rich what a rich set of possibilities that are there right instead of being afraid of it. It's like this is my this is my legacy.

This is my inheritance. This is all of it is my Christopher Okigbo is my inheritance. The griot, and I don't mean griot loosely, but the griot that we've read about there was a there was a Somali griot who had died in it we read in the times newspaper in 1912 it was a little column saying that this griot had died and had died with them taking a history of art times England had a little story about a griot. That's my inheritance so for me that is massively important Yeah,

MATTHEW SHENODA 30:48

That's beautiful. Whatever you call it. I like it.

KWAME DAWES 30:52

Yeah. Inheritance. Inheritance. I can live with that. There you go.

MATTHEW SHENODA 30:58

All right. I want to get into some poems.

31:01

Reading: "African Postman"

MATTHEW SHENODA 31:01

So, you're a deeply prolific writer, author of over 30 books of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, plays, academic articles. It's all really quite embarrassing to be honest. I want to pivot a bit and to your work as a poet and ask that you read a few poems. So thing that I often get asked I don't know why people ask me this but they do. They ask me what my favorite Kwame Dawes poem is. Oh

KWAME DAWES 31:31

You get asked that.

MATTHEW SHENODA 31:32

I get asked this maybe because I worked on your new and selected me.

KWAME DAWES 31:35

And so you tell me this intimate thing in front of everybody. You've never told me this before.

MATTHEW SHENODA 31:40

Listen. I'm about to tell you something more. You just hold on here. What I say to people when they ask me this is I say what a foolish question right this is like asking what droplet of water is most refreshing when you enter into the sea how can you pick a single Kwame Dawes poem

KWAME DAWES 31:58

Interview by a poet and this is what happens

MATTHEW SHENODA 32:02

Yeah but here's the thing I'm going to reveal to you in front of all these people the truth of the matter is I may in fact have a favorite Kwame Dawes poem

KWAME DAWES 32:12

Wow so all of At least just nonsense.

MATTHEW SHENODA 32:16

Yeah, of course.

KWAME DAWES 32:17

Just sweet talk.

MATTHEW SHENODA 32:18

That's right. Yeah, just cuz I don't feel like answering their questions. Why people approaching me to ask about you? It's annoying. Anyways, I wonder if you can read African Postman.

KWAME DAWES 32:31

I'll be happy to. Yeah. [Reading: "African Postman"] African Postman, for Solomon Ephraim Wolf son. Who is that? Is the African postman daddy Burning Spear east from Addis Ababa and then south deep into the rift valley. I can hear the horns trumpeting over the flat roofed acacia trees. See the African women bend low with wood heavy on their backs. And the cows, goats, donkeys, mules, sheep, and horses snapped into obedient herds by sprinting children, moving along the roadside. Life happens here. I'm traveling to the land. I have heard about Shashamane, the green place. 500 acres of just benevolence. And I know now that I long to hear the roots man tell me how. Despite rumors of his passing, the Natty keeps on riding, keeps on standing in the fields of praise to hold on to the faith of roots people.

Brother Solomon, you put the name Ephraim on your head and carry the face of true Rasta. The face of an Ashanti warrior, eyes deep under heavy lids and your skin tight as leather, blacker than black. I have met you before on the streets of Kingston. There where you found you trod to the hiss and slander of the heathen. You Natty Dread gathering the people's broken minds into your calabash. You carry it all. You tell them return to the roots the healing shall take place. You are Burning Spear's voice in the fields of [Unclear: te]. You tell me of the prophecy of Marcus and I listen to you through the phlegm through the gruff of your voice.

And suddenly when I ask about the passing of the emperor, you rise up like a staff of correction. Your voice reaching back to the mountains. Your warrior self, your yard man greatness. And you speak, a mystery of those who have ears but do not hear, and those who have eyes and won't see. And I know that this dread will one day stand in this soil and find his feet growing roots. That soon the earth will be darker for the arrival of Solomon. Let the heathen rage. Let the doubter scoff. Let the Ghanaian youth whose eyes have seen the face of Jesus Christ. Let him too sit and marvel at the faith of the Natty. For this African postman has forsaken father and mother and has come to stand before his imperial majesty to call only him father so that the father might call him son and the world will carry on its weary march and the ibises will swoop in the Ethiopian dusk and the smoke will rise from wood fires and the night will come with news that The roots man after 400 years of being told he is homeless has come home.

Yes, J has come home. Sons and daughters of his imperial majesty Selassie, earth's rightful ruler without any apology say this is the time when I and I will come home. Yes. Oh, come on. Hold it for now. Let go. Now let go. Now let go.

MATTHEW SHENODA 36:52

Thank you. So I'm not going to go deep down this road because if I do, we'll be here all night. But the musicality of that poem, the chukoon rhythm of roots reggae that builds and builds is something I find so incredibly masterful. Tell me a little bit about this poem. You may not remember. Do you remember the context in which you wrote this poem?

KWAME DAWES 37:18

Yeah, I may not remember. He's a funny guy. No, I remember. So I wrote I some years ago the BBC approached me about doing a piece on Haile Selassie at in Bath. I think there was some centenary some celebration of Haile Selassie because during the war the second world war and during the war Haile Selassie was exiled in Bath England of all places. So they said, "Well, if you come to Bath and spend some time there, maybe visit some of the places he was at and maybe write a piece about it for radio and so on." So, I said, "Well, I need to go to Ethiopia, because like how can I do Selassie and so on."

And so, they finally agreed because I had never been to Ethiopia at that time. So, I went to Ethiopia and I interviewed people. I met his great-granddaughter and all that, Selassie's daughter and so on. But one of the trips that I took was to Shashamane in the in where there were Jamaican and African Selassie had seeded some land set aside some land for blacks of the diaspora to come there. He had pointed out that they need to work but they can come and live there and many Jamaicans went there. And Solomon was one of those people who had gone there. And so I was interviewing him and I was talking to him and I remember at one point in the interview I said to him, "So how did it feel when Selassie died boy?"

And that was the wrong question. Wrong question. Because Solomon who looked like an Old Testament prophet already rose up. He had a staff and you say, "Oh, you sal who you mean dead?" Oh said, well, past I don't know what say. So every morning I and I wake up, I go out into the woods and I talk to Selassie as my father but talk to him. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Coming on my yard and say whoa. Say and it was one of the most powerful moments for me because I understood the nature of faith, the nature the mutating nature of faith, the necessity of it, the urgency of it. And so it just so this is why Burning Spear Winston Rodney: "Sons and daughters of his imperial majesty Haile Selassie, earth's rightful ruler without any apology say this is the time when I and I shall come home. Yes Jah, Nyah this most moving thing that happened and this poem just rose out of that encounter. Yeah.

40:38

Documentary poems: Wisteria and "Coffee Break"

KWAME DAWES 40:38

Yeah.

MATTHEW SHENODA 40:38

So, this what I'll call a kind of documentary impulse exists in quite a bit of your poetry. I'm not going to ask you to dig into this now, but you did a major project called Wisteria. Where you interviewed many of the elder women of South Carolina and their 70s and 80s at the time who had lived through really the thick of Jim Crow. Yeah. And from that came this book of poems wisteria which was then turned into a really beautiful production from the composer Kevin Simmons which you should all check out.

But another project that you worked on for some time you did some significant work on HIV AIDS in Jamaica. Again as a kind of documentary work which I think if I understand did not initially start out as a poetry project.

No. In fact, the documentary work that you won an Emmy award for. Yeah. You looked beautiful on the red carpet, by the way. I did. Yeah. I did. I did. I had a nice suit. Yeah, that's right. So,

KWAME DAWES 41:40

It was rented, but it was nice.

MATTHEW SHENODA 41:45

But from that kind of work, which was a really kind of beautiful multimedia piece, you wrote a set of poems that I find really kind of very moving and painful and a bit heartbreaking and sometimes haunting. So I'll ask that you read one of those poems called

KWAME DAWES 42:04

Coffee Break. [Reading: "Coffee Break"] Coffee Break. It was Christmas time. The balloons needed blowing. And so in the evening, we sat together to blow balloons and tell jokes. And the cool air off the hills made me think of coffee. So I said, "Coffee would be nice." And he said, "Yes, coffee would be nice." and smiled as his thin fingers pulled the balloons from the plastic bags. So I went for coffee and it takes a few minutes to make the coffee and I did not know if he wanted cow's milk or condensed milk. And when I came out to ask him, he was gone just like that. In the time it took me to think cow's milk or condensed, the balloons sat lightly on his still lap.

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah. This is in the voice of a man who was running an indigent home in Jamaica in Montego Bay and during the AIDS HIV AIDS crisis at the height of it in Jamaica they were losing 30 people a week in that home. That home was a place for the poor and it wasn't set up as an HIV space but it became that where they came to die and I interviewed him and I remember asking him I said you've seen so much death those numbers are just overwhelming and I said but does anybody stay with you And he told me three people. One was a little girl who came there after both her parents had died.

Her mother had died of AIDS. The father contracted the disease from her. The mother became violently angry, raped his daughter and she became HIV positive. And then he dies. And so the girl comes to the place and he said she was just a bright, exciting child and lifted the spirits of everybody and then he lost her. So he says, "I'll never forget that girl." And then he remembered a man who loved mangoes, but when he was sick with the disease, he couldn't keep down mangoes. He just kept throwing up and couldn't eat mangoes. And one day they had a brain wave between him and the guy. And the guy said, "But I'm going dead anyway."

And he said, "Yeah." So he said, "Well, see a bucket here and see a bowl of mangoes here." And he said, "The two of them sat there and ate mangoes and he threw up and ate mangoes and he threw up and ate mangoes and he threw up." And he remember that moment. He said, "Yes, the man died, but his glee and joy to be able to just eat mangoes and get sick and eat mangoes was transformative. And then

finally he told of this simple little story of how quickly Christmas but and this is almost literally verbatim what he told me except the one image at the end the balloons on his still lap. That's me, the poet, thinking that you're blowing balloons and that last balloon is his breath. And that is that's just my intervention as a poet. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you.

46:37

Reading: "Satta" (en route to Columbia, South Carolina)

MATTHEW SHENODA 46:37

You've written to quite a bit, as I've mentioned, Wisteria and other poems of the American South, particularly South Carolina, a place where you kind of first set roots in the United States. I wonder if you can read the poem Satta in route to Columbia, South Carolina.

KWAME DAWES 46:58

Yeah, this is an old poem because this is a poem of when we moved to South Carolina and South Carolina was making for us for we've moved around a bit and we still see South Carolina as home. We are embraced by the African-American community there in powerful ways and by the state. But anyway, this is an early poem. [Reading: "Satta"] Satta. Satta Massagana is a great reggae tune, but I'll reference it later on. I-Roy. Satta on route to Columbia, South Carolina. I-Roy rides the gap where the Sachs used to rest and the base talking to the royal man who can turn a rhyme into sacredness. Want to chant damnation where my enemies gawk at the tumbling and jammen's ramming home a truth.

Who can say concubine? Like tracing out the wicked's path to hell like I-Roy's mouth shooting fire. So "Satta Massagana," says the prophet cool like a knife edged and then catch the cross tick-tacking a rhythm. Satta Massagana. I'm striding through an alien landscape. The road smooth, the air heavy with rain, and my heart blues along. When the prophet speaks, and it's enough for the grooves of a 45's glimmering vinyl, the comfort of God again on me. Look into the book of life and you will see that there's a land far, far away. That there's a land far far away. It's a poem of nostalgia, I think. Yes. Yeah.

MATTHEW SHENODA 48:57

It's a poem of nostalgia, but also a very multi-layered diasporic poem. Definitely a diasporic poem because it's translating Jamaica into this landscape, this very African space called South Carolina.

KWAME DAWES 49:15

I don't think people understand how African South Carolina is. You go to the you go to the Gullah Geechee community, St. Helena Island. The rituals. There's a great artist called Jonathan Green who talks about going through his own right of passage, initiation, sent out into the woods for three days as a child to see to just, he's six years old. This is his initiation. And this is when he becomes an artist. He sees himself as an artist. All of that is taking place in that space. Where Africa just remained doggedly present and it's in that community that I'm trying to make these connections, these difficult connections. Yeah.

MATTHEW SHENODA 50:09

Going to just do a little time check here. Yeah, we got a few more minutes.

50:13

Reading: "Before Winter"

MATTHEW SHENODA 50:13

A few more minutes. All right, let me see here. Let's jump to Nebraska. Yeah, your beautiful stint in the Midwestern United States of America. Boy, I'm going to ask you to read before winter and then we can you can say a few words if you want to or if you want to leave that party of life. I mean, I

KWAME DAWES 50:40

No, no, no. Don't blame me. Everywhere I go has made me, and Nebraska certainly did. [Reading: "Before Winter"] Before Winter. I imagine there's a place of deep rest, not in the resting, but after when the body has forgotten the weight of fatigue or of its many betrayals. How unfair that once I thought it clever to blame my body for the wounds in me. The ankle bulbous and aching, the heaviness in the thighs, and the fat, the encroachment of flesh. It is hard to believe that there are those who do not know that it is possible to let things go, to then see the expansion of flesh. It is so easy, and that knowing is a pathology.

What is unknown to me is the clear day of rest. I carry a brain of crushed paper. Everything unfolds as if by magic. Every spot of understanding is a miracle. I cannot take any credit for the revelations. They come and go as easily as the wind. You must know that this is a preamble to an epiphany. I will record the late morning light of October. The damp soiled backyard, the verdant green lawn, the bright elegance of leaves thrown over it all, turning nonchalantly in the wind. And the Nebraska sky blue as a kind of watery ease, a comfort, it is all I can say. The kind one knows even standing there waiting for the dog to squat.

One that I will remember for years but will never have the language to speak of. One of those precious insignificances that we collect and hoard. The moment lasts 10 breaths and in that silence I imagine that I can see spirits. I can know myself and I will not fear the betrayals of body and love and earth and the machinations of self-made emperors and pontificates. Trump. It will be winter soon. I know my body is collecting water in its nether regions. The weight of the hibernating mammal sorting everything in drowsy, slow-moving pervation. I mean, I'm losing myself to the shelter we build to beat back sorrow and the weight of our fears. I have covered thousands of miles in a few days.

And I feel my parts flaking off. A shedding of yellow pieces covering the turning earth. And I am helpless to this soft disappearing that some call sleep. I will stretch out and breathe. Thank you. Yeah.

MATTHEW SHENODA 54:00

Say a little bit about this poem that there's something about its introspection on one's own mortality. Yeah. Its embodiment that I think it's not rare in your work, but it's really stark in this particular poem.

KWAME DAWES 54:14

It's stark there. Yeah, it's there. It's a poem that is thinking about mortality. It's thinking about what happens to the body. I'm I call myself the poet of the body because I'm I really gauge what I write. I think if anybody reads my work, you can see my interest in the nature of the body. But it's also sort of an unabashedly look at my physicality, my fat, the things that I concern myself with, but also the quest for shelter. And in a sense, it is happening in a landscape that feels alien to me. And I suspect that in a few years time I would read my time, our time in Nebraska as traumatic. Even though while going through it, I didn't think of it that way.

But I think I'll read of I read it as a traumatic as almost a kind of assault on the body because I was always aware of my body in that landscape and in that space. And yet I found comfort in the sky. I found comfort in snow. I found comfort in things other than other bodies, which I think is part of that peculiar trauma. Yeah. So, but you never know. Poetry is weird that way. It starts to teach you stuff that you don't know is going on. And so I read this with deep empathy for Kwame Dawes.

56:09

Reading: "The Prodigal Converses with the Land"

MATTHEW SHENODA 56:09

All right, I'm going to ask you to close us out with one last poem from your latest book, Sturge Town. If you could read The Prodigal Converses with the Land.

KWAME DAWES 56:18

Yeah. So this is a poem that goes on for a minute. So I'll do that one. "Prodigal Converses with the Land" is a conversation between me and my mother's town, my mother's town, Cape Coast. So I'll just read it. It's in two voices. The first is in the voice of Cape Coast one. I am a city in translation. What I say to you is not in the language I carry. You will never understand the pidgin of my soil because you are always a foreigner. It is true that your grandmother's bones are interred me in me and I know you hope that by returning to me you would hear her speaking but you must know that even more desperate people have come asking for some sound to carry through.

At least that I was named by white people and they have left the noise of atrocities here. So that when those who come back year after year, instead of speaking of the drama of the ocean beating against the shore, instead of the shouts and songs of the fishermen dragging their catch across the dark sand for the women to collect and take to the market. Instead of the clubs, the high life, the scent of bread baking at night. Instead of the deep forest that reached the edge of the sea and the way the sun sets on Elmina, instead of this, all they can talk of are the ones who were collected here and taken across the waters only to return as interlopers, people with foreign tongues who do not understand our language of centuries.

We are the Akan. We are warriors. The broken companies of the agua. This means nothing to you. What is the smell of soap and algae in the gutters. And the way the brine in the lagoons thickens in the air, the addiction to aara, the tart heat of pepper and the tomb of the mortal and pestle, the familiar sounds of heart and hearth. These are the things that you will talk about. Places of nostalgia of home. But all places know themselves by the blood that has been shed there. The sadness that will always haunt the laughter of this place. Here is that church where your mommy, the Pentecostal woman, found her own Jesus, saw the coil of a python on the heavy shoulder of her daughter, your mother, and they cast out the demon curse on her, freed her from what would have consumed her.

She was young then, the age of your youngest daughter. But she remembers. Chucho remembers. To Kwame. I know that the invention of memory, the silence before memory is made, the imagined comfort of language through failing, though failing every time, though betraying my inner head and liver is what I have, is what we all carry. I lied when I said I found the translation of this land into something like a nation or home or comfort or the spirits of ancestors. I lied. And still I will say to you who stand at the gates of this village, please tell mommy, her grandson, the one she used to tease, tell her he's asking to be let in and he's craving her fresh baked bread. Thank you.

MATTHEW SHENODA 1:00:59

Thank you, Kwame Dawes. Thank you all. I think Kwame is going to be signing books over here. Yeah. And thank you to all the folks to Efe and all the crew for putting this together. And thank you, Kwame.

KWAME DAWES 1:01:10

Thank you, Matthew. Appreciate it. Thank you very much.

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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