

DIGITAL AGNES

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Drawing Power from Poetry

With Opened Mouths: The Podcast

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SPEAKERS

Qanita Lilla and Juliane Okot Bitek

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TRANSCRIPT

Note: Juliane Okot Bitek kindly reads some of her poems from her new book of poetry, *A is for Acholi*, published in 2022 by Buckrider Books.

[Music]

Otoniya Juliane Okot Bitek is a multi-award winning Acholi poet. Her *100 Days* is a book of poetry that reflects on the meaning of memory two decades after the Rwanda genocide. *A is for Acholi*, her most recent poetry collection, is out now from Wolsak and Wynn. Juliane is an assistant professor of Black Creativity at Queen's University in Kingston Ontario, which occupies the lands of the Anishinaabe and the Haudenosaunee people.

In this episode, we find out about the transnational routes and remnants of memory, of bearing witness and the urgency of the creative project.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you, Julie, for meeting me today, and thank you for coming here and sharing with us.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Thanks, Qanita. Thanks for having me.

Qanita Lilla: It's a pleasure. Can we start off by thinking about what led you to choose writing poetry and storytelling as your creative practice?

Juliane Okot Bitek: I used to say that I ended up here because I sucked at everything else. And it's factually true that I've tried so many different things and jobs, attempted at different skills. Storytelling and poetry have worked out for me, as well as teaching. So, I guess it's just taken a long time to get to myself.

Qanita Lilla: What other things did you do?

Juliane Okot Bitek: I worked at an alarm monitoring station once.

Qanita Lilla: Alarm, like a house alarm?

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah. Because I thought that was an important job for me, that made me feel like I could attend to people's emergencies and stay calm, and [laughs] --

Qanita Lilla: Wow. [laughs]

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah. It did not work out [laughs] but not because I didn't want to do it. It was also hard on the body, four days on and off, then four nights and days. So, it was a dizzying time. And I also had a small child, so much as I liked the job, the job situation did not fit a young mom. If your kid is sick, you can't stay away from work, and you have to organize for someone else to stay at home with your sick kid, that didn't seem right. That's an example of a job or a way of living that I wanted to do, but could not work for me. I've always enjoyed being inside a story, especially when someone else is telling it. I love looking at how stories work – movies, novels, literary studies – us, how we are in the world. We are always inside our story, right? It just seems like coming back home. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: That's interesting. Who were the people that helped shape you and guide you along this path?

Juliane Okot Bitek: Everybody. I think the distinct names and specific times, but truly everybody. To think about it, for instance, growing up in a home where storytelling was always in the air. Being surrounded by books, both my mom and dad told stories, and we had lots of visitors coming in and out of the house. Storytelling as a way of being in the world has always just been there. Along the way, I've also had instructors who have guided me to recognize that what I was doing was fine. It wasn't just a hobby; something to do on the side while you're doing real work, I came to understand it that way. I have a parent who was a writer, he's not alive anymore though he was in the business of poetry, storytelling, and teaching. I didn't have to be told that it's a way that one could live. I just didn't understand yet that it was a way that I could live too. Right now, the name that comes to mind is Barbara Binns. She was an instructor at Langara College in Vancouver and is retired now. And I used to work at the print shop at Langara College, she'd come tell me every so often "I'm not retiring until you go back to school."

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I decided to go back to school so she would stop telling me that. [laughs] and then I went got a Master's degree in English and a PhD. Now, the name that comes to mind is Erin Baines -- she'd hired me to do some work on storytelling. And she told me, "This work could be a PhD thesis. Why don't you just apply for a PhD?". And then she walked me through the process. Another person that comes to mind is Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, a professor at UBC [University of British Columbia]. I took a class on memory with her -- and to this day it still reverberates in my brain, because I learnt that storytelling and memory are political. So, it's not something we take for granted. That has really shaped how I position myself when I write or think. Yeah. So those are three names, I suppose, but really everybody.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. During this time, were you always writing on scraps of paper when you're doing other things? How did you get it out? How did you --

Juliane Okot Bitek: When I was very young, 11, I got my first poem published and it feels now almost like a fluke, but I wrote a poem, and my dad loved it so much. He was telling his friends about it. And then one day he said, "We are going to the newspaper." And then we went to the newspaper, and he told the editor, "You have to publish this work." [laughs]

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I know, but then I didn't think about writing as something that I must do. I was generally good at English composition, like many people are. Writing in my early 20s, not so much, just the usual writing in your diary kind of thing, but I always read a lot. I think I was reading more than I was writing, yeah.

Qanita Lilla: And when you were young, were you schooled in English? Was that your first language at school?

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah. I went to school in Kenya and then in Uganda, both former British colonies. So, yes, English was the lingua franca. In Kenya also Swahili is a lingua franca. I've always spoken English.

Qanita Lilla: And in your home, did people speak English or did your parents speak English to each other? --

Juliane Okot Bitek: No, my parents always spoke Acholi to each other. They're both Acholi from Northern Uganda. And when my sister was born, my parents were in the United States, I suppose I was there too [laughs], and my mom tells me that I had the cutest American accent [laughs]. It's not there anymore thankfully, but I've spoken English all my life. Our parents didn't always speak to us in Acholi, I shouldn't say we picked it up, because

I guess they taught us somehow, but it wasn't the language around us when we were growing up because we were in exile. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: Okay, that's interesting because my parents always spoke Afrikaans to each other and to the rest of the family but spoke English to us. So, we were surrounded by this other language called Kombuis Taal which is translated as "Kitchen Language." That's where it originated from, the kitchens and staff. My grandmother spoke Kombuis, and it was a language that was then appropriated into Afrikaans and Suiver Afrikaans, which (was considered) 'pure' and (then) amalgamated with Dutch and German, then put into an Afrikaans' dictionary used by the apartheid state.

Juliane Okot Bitek: What?

Qanita Lilla: Yes, so, its origins are in the Kombuis.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Wow.

Qanita Lilla: You know, in the kitchen.

Juliane Okot Bitek: That makes me think of Shango, it's a language that young people made up when I was a kid in Kenya – I think that it was about that time, I could be wrong, it was about that time – when kids did not want their parents to know what they were saying. It's a mixture between Kiswahili, English, and this Shango. And I didn't become an adult in Kenya, but since being away, I've come to understand that Shango is a language that's spoken everywhere.

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Juliane Okot Bitek: So, it's not pure Swahili or English either.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: But it's both.

Qanita Lilla: It's like a mix.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah. And if you don't know, you don't know. Even if you might know English and you might know Swahili, it can completely escape you.

Qanita Lilla: Yes, it's very similar. And also, the liveliness of the language is totally different. You can't express things in any other language in another way. And so, it was sad for me growing up feeling that I shouldn't speak it because it's associated with a lower class and

being uneducated. My grandmother spoke English to us, which was weird because it always felt like an adopted language. I was just interested to think about whether you were surrounded by another language, and especially having been in exile, what your relationship was like to your mother tongue.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I remember once my grandmother came to visit us in Nairobi. She lived in Gulu, Northern Uganda, and didn't speak very much English. She spoke some Swahili like everybody else does, more than one language. And here she was trying to communicate with us, and we were mostly speaking English, right. I remember this distinct time when she was telling us how to make a mosquito nest. And I thought, first off, "Why are we making nests for mosquitoes? She illustrated to us, kind of like a weaving of grass. Then she said, "Now you try." We were making these – and they were very pretty – I thought about it for a long time, "Why would people make nests for mosquitoes?" It occurred to me about 10 years ago, long after she's gone, that she actually meant net as N-E-T-S.

Qanita Lilla: Oh, yeah.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Right?

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: And then I tried to get some grass between my hands so I could remember. The memory is gone from my fingers of how to make mosquito nets. Now I have the knowledge that there was an Acholi practice of making mosquito nets, which I didn't understand all these years because I thought she was saying "nest."

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I've tried looking for that information and I can't find it anywhere. But, of course, we would have been making mosquito nets, right?

Qanita Lilla: It's amazing how (older) generations communicate with younger ones, and how we feel that we understand, but there's sadness because we can see stress in adults, that they're trying to make a connection. And they have to think of new ways of doing it because they don't have the language.

Juliane Okot Bitek: The same grandmother, and I introduced her to my children, and they were speaking across four generations -- my kids have zero Acholi. I was acting as the translator between my kids and their great grandmother, which was very weird and a bit sad, but at least there was a language, well, there were at least two languages that they could communicate in. Most of the time was spent on her looking at them and them

stealing glances at her and understanding that this is a great grandmother, but there is not much else. They were very young, six and ten, I think at the time. No, four and 10. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: I think that's powerful and important even though it's difficult.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah. And that they had it.

Qanita Lilla: Yes, and they know and understand. These are our connections and people especially when they're in exile or also far away.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Right.

Qanita Lilla: Kind of free floating.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I mean, they know that their grandmother had a mom too -- everyone has one -- that kind of thinking.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Which is a bit different from us not growing up at home. Well, my kids didn't but at least they met their great grandmother. I knew that my grandmother and her oldest brother were called Adam. And for the longest time I thought that Adam -- because he was very old in my head, was the biblical one [laughs].

Qanita Lilla: The first man [laughs].

Juliane Okot Bitek: Oh yeah. So, you know how you can trace your family back to the biblical Adam?

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: For me, it was obvious. That was my grandmother's brother, right? [laughs]

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Juliane Okot Bitek: It was very rude to find out that it was actually not.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah.

Juliane Okot Bitek: It's okay. It's not even my tradition, so it doesn't matter.

Qanita Lilla: [laughs] Would you say that a lot of your practice is based on the idea of movement, journeys, and change? Even when you talk, just generally, every day, it's about different places. In your mind, you don't even acknowledge that this is what happened there and here. It's kind of altogether in forms.

Juliane Okot Bitek: That's so interesting, Qanita. For a long time, I used to struggle with the idea of belonging. And I used to yearn for the idea of home. I wish I could belong somewhere and there was a place called home, that kind of thing. Not so much anymore. I was thinking -- which is quite different from what you're saying -- that it's because I try to spend time in the moment. I can't do anything now about having grown up in exile or not having grown up at home. The fact that any place I've lived in, the question always arises, "Where do you come from?" And that includes when I go to Uganda, or to Acholi. Invariably someone will say, "Where are you from?" Now I've come to understand myself as a perpetual stranger, the need to belong is not so strong. I think it gives me an added way of observing what's around me because I can't take it for granted, since it's not mine. I like to think that I'm an observer even though my eyesight is not very good [laughs]. Yeah, that's interesting you should say that, that way.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. I like that idea of home, it's very interesting because on the way walking here, I saw a banner in front of one of the halls and it said, "Welcome Home," because of Homecoming.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes.

Qanita Lilla: So, I kind of thought, "What does this mean?" They're welcoming a transitory community -- other students who've come -- have I ever felt this way about any place? I think that's why I'm so drawn back to younger childhood memories because I had family and a grounded kind of presence. When I chose to leave and go elsewhere, when I came back, that space and place is completely different.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Right. It has moved on without you.

Qanita Lilla: It has. And I think that definitely affects your sense of home, as being a place.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Home becomes defined by time rather than landscape.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I'll read a poem for you.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek:

these days like loose threads like untied laces like frayed edges like
tenuous connections days like remembrances days like bits we can only
access if we're to survive days that are untenable palpable days pulsating
through that prominent vein on your temple days like memories you can't
hold onto like last tuesday which means nothing at all except that there
was last tuesday there was a tuesday last week

[*A is for Acholi*, 12]

[laughs]

And that's an *alphabet for the unsettled*.

Qanita Lilla: What does it mean to have an alphabet for the unsettled if we don't have a language? If we don't have a language, what does it mean to have an alphabet?

Juliane Okot Bitek: I think the alphabet for me is an established code. And those who are unsettled, "How can they have an established code?" I'm guessing, suspecting, hoping that those languages we were talking about before, the fluid ones, the ones that change meaning with the light, depend on who's speaking and what time of day it is. It helps us to know who is unsettled, and we would need to remain that way. That's not to say being unsettled is a terrible thing, and I'll return to that. Saying that an alphabet for the unsettled is like a wish forward. We could come to find languages to speak about our lives, ourselves. And our lives and memories, we can establish ourselves in the language and in a place. We're settled because we live in Canada where lots of people call themselves settlers. And that word has moved through the years, it used to read to me as code for White people. Then I heard people saying that settlers were anybody but the Indigenous people of these lands. It was complicated by those who said "Well, those who were stolen and brought to these lands can't be called settlers because they did not come to settle." And then I heard from those who claim it as "settleness, settlerdome" [laughs] -- those who claim to be settlers, are perhaps using the word to establish themselves vis-à-vis the First Nations people. To think about their responsibility for being here -- all those different ways of thinking about the word settler. I have never been able to be comfortable with it. And given the history and presence of Canada, it's hard to be settled or call myself "a settler." I think if I call myself a settler, somebody who settles, it's someone who makes peace with what is. And it's hard to make peace with that because these are complicated and difficult times. So, I can't be settled.

Qanita Lilla: Also, it's like negating movement -- physically, emotionally, psychically, and spiritually. We sit.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes. We squat.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: “We're not going anywhere anymore, right?” And so, if you are unsettled, you should be thinking about the next movement or what to do about what's unsettling you. So, I think that being unsettled is not a terrible thing after all.

Qanita Lilla: I think it's a lived reality for most of us, to be in-between spaces and things, even in your daily life. You're never exactly in one place because you're thinking of the things that are moving in your life [laughs] like your home and work life, all these things moving. It's about finding peace in unsettlement.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah, it's also activating. “What are you going to do about it if you're unsettled? What are your responsibilities to find peace or to create peace?” It means you can't just squat in a place. In a week we are thinking about Homecoming, for those whom Queen's is a place to come home to, “What does it mean to settle into the tradition of Homecoming?”

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. What traditions do you generally like to settle? Also, when there is somebody coming home, there's always somebody who's not welcome.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Right.

Qanita Lilla: Who are all the people who have come and are not coming back for whatever reason?

Juliane Okot Bitek: Who cannot come back.

Qanita Lilla: Who choose not to.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Do you remember that short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas?”

Qanita Lilla: No.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Oh, my goodness. It's a hell of a story. I'm going to summarize it poorly so that I'm not giving away anything. It's about a settlement where everything is fine, called “Omelas.” There are some people every year who walk away from this place. She writes as if it doesn't matter, but the title of the piece is called “The Ones Who Walk Away from

Omelas.” What does it mean to walk away from a place of settlement? That story sits in my head, and every few days I think about it.

Qanita Lilla: Wow. [laughs] That means a lot, I'm going to be reading that.

Juliane Okot Bitek: It's a very short story, but it's very good. Yeah.

Qanita Lilla: I find that, alongside this sense of looking at belonging, settlement, and home - your work is very playful. It's light and has this quality of being able to move language in a way that is unpredictable. The way that you use repetition or move and shift words. What kind of place does that playfulness come from?

Juliane Okot Bitek: The quick answer that comes to my head right away, and I know this is not an exam [laughs]. So I don't have to have the right answer, it is a folk tale that we all grew up with, where there's always a trickster. For many people, Anansi, or a spider. For us in our tradition, it's the hare. What's it for your tradition? Do you have a trickster image, animal, or something like that?

Qanita Lilla: No, we just borrowed from Grimm, it's fairy tales and Shakespeare.

Juliane Okot Bitek: On the West Coast, where I lived for a long time, it was the Raven. Life can be very serious and hard, but those characters are always playing tricks to get us to see something else. Given that our lives can be so complicated and given that we have several kinds of media and literatures to get us to see how hard life is and how complicated it is, as if we don't know. “What can I do in my writing that helps people to see the glint differently?” It's still possible to write about very hard things and not focus on the hardness of it, right? I think one of the things that repetition does, for example, is to lull us. You can draw somebody in, and they know what to expect because of the repetition. And while the thing is being repetitioned [laughs], whatever it is that's being repeated, then you can insert something else. So let me read for you a poem since we're talking about resettlement and repetition. This is called “Resettlement.”

resettling officer
one who helps you fill out forms
one who helps you re-settle
one who knows social services
one who knows court appearances

fold up the sheets from the clothesline
hold them up to your fate
hold them up to your face
hold them up to the sky

hold them up to the tree
hold them up to the sound of playing children
hold them up to the bills
hold them up to the calendar
hold them up to the stove
hold them up against the dusty windowsill

he's not coming the resettlement officer says

settle in

[*A is for Acholi*, 69]

Qanita Lilla: Wow [laughs]. That's one of those poems in this book that I said is hard-hitting. It's hard-hitting because the form is light. So, it feels like you are folding laundry. You're folding it, but you're finding things in the pockets or things that are opening up the narrative. That image of laundry is so powerful, because in Canada we cannot hang our washing on a clothesline.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Well, it depends on the house you live in.

Qanita Lilla: I guess you're right [laughs]. People live without dryers and heating. I think that in our spaces, and I think what is so unnerving and unsettling, is how these spaces feel generic and homogenous. There is a different kind of Apartheid that exists in other spaces, outside the ones that I exist in. That was my thing, almost every day I used to hang the washing on the line. There's something very special about the smell of sunshine in your clothes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes.

Qanita Lilla: You can't get that.

Juliane Okot Bitek: No, you can't. Not artificially. Well, not as far as I know, anyway.

Qanita Lilla: No, but it does give life to your clothes and towels. Just to smell and feel the place that you're in.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Right.

Qanita Lilla: You can smell it. And suddenly, I came here, and I cannot smell it. And it feels like a sense has been taken away.

Juliane Okot Bitek: You know for many years I used to think, is it the same sun under which we live?

Qanita Lilla: I don't think --

Juliane Okot Bitek: I used to think the sun was very hot. If there was a cloudless sky, the sun would be hot. And now, I've lived in Canada – what is it 2022 -- for 32 years.

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I know that you can have a sunny day where the sun is low battery or something [laughs]. There's no heat to it, just a picture in the sky.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah, I think it hits the earth or where we are in a different angle or something.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Still --

Qanita Lilla: Because it's not there.

Juliane Okot Bitek: It's the most powerful thing in our solar system and it cannot penetrate the winter.

Qanita Lilla: And it can't come here. It can't.

Juliane Okot Bitek: But then think about the technologies and ways of people who have been here for time immemorial and have figured it out?

Qanita Lilla: That is mind-blowing to me, that people with brown skin could live here [laughs] for time immemorial. It is completely, completely mind-blowing.

Juliane Okot Bitek: And they have, and they do.

Qanita Lilla: Yes. I'd really like to talk about that, how Indigenous practice on Turtle Island speaks to how you work in your own practice and writing.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I'm going to return to that. First let me read for you a poem called, "There's Something About ... Vancouver," because I lived there for a long time.

Qanita Lilla: You had to do this.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I did have to do this. This is a poem that I want to illustrate that I write about what I observe. And so, it helps me to establish myself from an orientation. "This is where I am. And from here, this place where I am, with whom can I have solidarity?" Then I return to talk about --

Qanita Lilla: Okay.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Okay. "There's Something About ... Vancouver." -- Before I read it, I just want to say that this is not specific to Vancouver, so it could be anywhere else in Canada.

there's something about Vancouver something about freedom something about dignity about being a woman today & about how a good education will save you something about god prayer faith about the strong traditions of your people about african culture & black girl magic about black pride like you know be proud of yourself

something about the importance of economy about working hard about capital something about shadow about colonialism about our aboriginals about our first nations people

about

ours

ours

ours

ours

ours

ours

there's something

about that meme floating about online that spreads the romance of african people who learn each other's songs & use them to fend off evil that has been beautifully packaged as ubuntu &

of course of course the entire world singing bob marley's one love one heart let's get together & feel all right

there's something about the language of belonging about memory justice healing about opportunities to begin again in a new country

there's something about welcoming refugees about the quebec minister of something, something telling us that women should not wear the hijab

because wearing the hijab means women are not free to wear what they
want
so women must not be told what to wear
because they're free to wear what they want
but not the hijab because she says so

there's something about how face coverings are now required
something about those face coverings or masks
or whatever language is in vogue
is a declaration of care for you for me of you for you

something about being together in this country that is as white as dana
claxton's buffalo-bone china & as old as old-stock canadians

& for sure for real there's something about buddy
something about buddy riding a bike towards me those two weeks ago
on main & first
something about the way buddy gets off his bike & addresses me directly
about not belonging here
& i'm all what
because I think I mishear
& buddy is you don't belong here you're a n*****
& w/out hesitation I know that this is an asshole move
& I call it for what it is
& I'm you are an asshole
& buddy's you're a n*****
& I'm you are an asshole
& buddy is two steps away
& I can smell all of last weekend on buddy
but I stand my goddamn stand
as buddy holds onto a bike that's mute
& we are a vortex around which vancouver spins
& traffic whirrs on & pedestrians walk on by
as buddy & I scream at each other
& I turn as buddy walks away
with a bike, a reluctant witness
& buddy hurls the word at me
this time with no pronoun
just vile just bile
n*****!
n*****!
n*****!

& i'm screaming back
asshole asshole asshole
& i have the last word
& i turn to keep my way

& two women's eyes meet mine
& look away

so, there's something about chill
something about it's not so bad
something about could've been way worse
something about maybe drunk maybe mental illness maybe stress
maybe you know the usual

something about citizenship
about freedom to be whoever you want to be today
about dignity & taking the high road
about privilege & family & good friends & continuous & never-ending hail
marys
& something about my girlfriend who tells me
swear to god I can walk with you to the police station right now & report
this & there's something about
i can't believe this kind of shit still happens in Vancouver today omg are
you alright

& the sea to sky highway
& the so-called superiority of western culture & economy & capital
& opportunity & hard work & forgiveness & generosity
& something about if it's so, so bad, why don't you go back to whatever
hell hole you came from

& mostly gratitude. Gratitude for the ancestral makeup of skin
of this skin that holds me in
& this skin that keeps me together this skin that keeps me whole

[*A is for Acholi*, 74-77]

[Applause]

Juliane Okot Bitek: [laughs] Thanks Qanita.

Qanita Lilla: Wow! That is a bomb, seriously. I didn't know if you wanted to go back to Buddy. That is the makeup that is my skin. Drawing power from that, it was actually the thing that drew out vileness and hostility from this other human being. I cannot fathom how you made that shift. How did you find power in that very thing, in that moment? It's phenomenal. Besides the obvious fact that this thing of beauty, resonance, and such familiarity will echo across generations. People will read this and find their solidarity and their voice through this. They'll understand that deep connection. How did you make that?

Juliane Okot Bitek: Well, the thing is, there's nothing unique about this story and this Buddy coming up to me without any kind of reason. He just saw me and thought, "Hmm, I can be an asshole to this woman." That decision, I imagine, comes from all those stories he has heard about people like me. He attempted to reduce me to a derogatory word. And I know that I am made of many more stories than what this person might have known about Black women, Black people. I also understood how I was saying that there's something about all these things happening in the news, COVID, care, love, hard work, and religion. How they're supposed to protect us, and we are able to rely on them -- the police." In that moment, even the fact of witnesses, of people seeing and hearing, and they don't come to your aid. All of that seems to be a moment to reduce you to nothing, but you are not nothing. You are made of so many stories that have been told, not just to you, but to other people across the world. And you're so much better connected. So, why should this stranger reduce you to nothing, right? I was also having to work my way through a lot of anger; I was so angry when this man did this thing. And yet, I could see right through the well-meaning friends who came and listened to me, wanting to do something. That it was very clear that even if something was done, if Buddy was stopped and had a finger pointed at him and said, "You can't talk to people like that." That would be one moment, but next week, would it stop him from talking to somebody like that? Who knows. If it did, good. But would it stop people across the world from talking to people like that? Probably not. I was thinking about how structures and stories are designed to make us feel one way or another about who we are. But the fact is -- and this is undeniable -- is that we have survived through centuries and here we still are. No matter what those stories have been. So that's really what I wanted to get at with that poem. If I had to return to solidarities with Indigenous people, I have some friends and colleagues with whom I do collaborations with. This particular friend, Peter Morin, we've been friends for a long time, and through extreme luck and opportunities, he came to my home in Northern Uganda. Peter knows me from home -- where my great grandparents are buried. He's a professor at OCAD University in Toronto and I have seen his performances over time and seen him singing, performing, and challenging what it means to live in these stories, and also invoking the voices on the land of his ancestors to challenge this colonial legacy that we live in. And he has also seen my work. So we work together, talk together, and write letters to each other. What does it mean for us to be in solidarity against the power structure that seeks to destroy us? He has also helped me to see that to be in this country, I have to think about what my contributions are to the people here. Not in a "I'm a good human kind of way and I'm here to help to save you." But "How and what

can I do with you together?” Yeah. I take that seriously enough that in the course that I'm teaching right now, it's BLCK280, that's the code for it. It's a course called, “African Literature on these Indigenous Lands.” It brings together work by African writers and artists, putting them in dialogue with Indigenous writers and artists so that there are conversations to be had – so now, when my students talk about African literature, they can also talk about Indigenous literature.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah. I think that kind of connection is really important because there are many synergies.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes.

Qanita Lilla: There are many things that talk to each other. I'm just thinking about the Indigenous and African ancestors at Agnes, and how I believe they literally draw power from each other because of their proximity. In a place that would otherwise be hostile, they are together and making the place more livable and generative.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes, and they also share a history of structures that brought them together. So, it's not by accident they share that space.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: In sharing that space, all these other things happen too. It's powerful to me that the collection is also in the basement of Agnes, which tells me they are literally the foundation for the gallery.

Qanita Lilla: That's interesting because most people think of a basement as subterranean, underneath, neglecting to think of it as a foundation --

Juliane Okot Bitek: It is.

Qanita Lilla: -- that everything is built up on.

Juliane Okot Bitek: And it's having the works from those traditions – and “traditions” suggesting that there's is one of each, but there are many African and Indigenous traditions – to say that when I am at Agnes and witnessing, seeing or observing in this space, I'm always aware of who's holding up this space. I'm thinking about that in a psychic kind of way, also physically, since those works are made by people, it is the power, talent, and the labour of African and Indigenous people who are holding up the building.

Qanita Lilla: Yes. And when you go there and visit it, you can feel it.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes, you can.

Qanita Lilla: You can feel that power. Julie, “Is it still true that if you didn't write, didn't get it out, your words would choke and sit with you?”

Juliane Okot Bitek: I think so. I have had many times when I'm writing -- and this comes back to me in a very powerful way, almost like a threat. I've had a sense of wordlessness. I cannot speak if I'm not writing, my words get lost.

Qanita Lilla: Wow.

Juliane Okot Bitek: So, it's not like catharsis, but a practice of working out -- isn't that catharsis? Oh my God.

[Laughter]

Juliane Okot Bitek: It's a way of me trying to make sense of something that should not be made sense of. So, it's a futile endeavour, but it is one that I do anyway. I have sort of given in to the idea that I don't need to make sense of what doesn't make sense, but I can illustrate it. Writing towards abstraction is something that I'm thinking about these days. In this book, *A is for Acholi* there's a section called “Excavating Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Three Letters at a Time.” It's a phenomenal title [laughs].

Qanita Lilla: Yes. And it seems completely impenetrable. Maybe it means reading it in three letters like that, and I tried. It works some of the time, then sometimes it's just sounds. Not literally the letters, it's something else. I was reading and I found a woman, and I remember from the story that this was Kurtz's Black lover who is the antithesis of the proper lady?

Juliane Okot Bitek: The White --

Qanita Lilla: The White --

Juliane Okot Bitek: -- fiancé.

Qanita Lilla: Yes.

Juliane Okot Bitek: So, there's a Black lover and the White fiancé.

Qanita Lilla: Yes. Who kind of reminds me of that porcelain you also speak of. She is a woman who is wild, passionate, and is expressive. Difficult to hold down. She flirts in and out of the story. It's like she's not a whole character, but I found her there, even though the text was chopped up, or split apart. There were these huge gaps, but she kind of lived there.

It was the perfect place for her to reside in this broken up space. And then you're a very benevolent writer that likes caring. So, you give it to us eventually. If you do the work a little bit, you'll find her. She makes an appearance, then she walks out and leaves as she must. And it was very powerful and phenomenal. She kind of transforms and becomes almost like every woman. And, you know, "I see Julie in here too."

Juliane Okot Bitek: Thanks for reading that work, Qanita, and thinking about it. That section reflected on a page from *Heart of Darkness*, it is such a powerful text. I think it's still studied as an iconic British text. It was written by Joseph Conrad, who was a Polish immigrant to the UK, to Britain. And he spoke many languages. He was a seaman and a writer. So, Conrad is one of those people -- we've got our genetic ancestors and he's one of my literary ancestors. And genetic ancestors, you can't do anything about those [laughs], and I cannot do anything about my literary ancestors either, but I claim him because he's one of those people whose work I think about a lot. So, he wrote *Heart of Darkness* based on a diary that kept with himself when he went to the Congo. His intentions, it's been said, was to get his fellow Europeans to see the evils of colonialism in the Congo. His heart was in the right place, but the fact remains he still could not see the people who were living there as people. In this one page, where he's writing about this African woman who is on her land with her ancestors, he doesn't even give her language. She doesn't speak and she is the lover of one of the main characters, Kurtz. How can she not speak? She is a passionate and wild apparition, a gorgeous woman, but she doesn't speak. What nonsense is that? I came to understand *Heart of Darkness* as a book of nonsense. No matter what his intention was, or how beautifully it's written, no matter how Conrad distances himself from the unnamed narrator of the story so that it's not to be read as something that Conrad himself wrote. I call it a nonsense text because it has created a very powerful idea of how people think about Africa and Africans. Even the phrase "heart of darkness" is still used by journalists who fly in from wherever the hell they live in the West and they go somewhere and write a piece, invariably it will be something about "from the heart of darkness," right? How is it that a whole people have come to be defined from the title of a text of a man who did not understand where he was. And so, in this page of *Excavating Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness Three Letters at a Time*, I decided to see what this text will look like if for every five letters I take out three letters in the middle. It will be the same text, but will it still make sense? Hopefully, not. And that is the rest of it. Just like that, I exorcised this man from my head. I don't think my future lineage will be as haunted by Conrad as he has haunted me all these years [laughs]. I needed to write back, and I have.

Qanita Lilla: Yeah, you did. And not only write back but resuscitated a memory of a woman.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yes. And to give space for that woman in the rest of this text.

Qanita Lilla: Yes, bringing her forth like today. I think that's what you did.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Yeah. So not writing means that I would be choked by stories like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. How can we be choked? When Buddy is still walking the streets accosting other people, possibly. So, I have to write. I don't have a choice.

Qanita Lilla: Well, thank you for writing and sharing with us. Really. Our lives are seriously richer because of this kind of labour -- it's tough to read. It's your experience and how you see the world is wonderful. Thank you.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Thanks, Qanita.

Qanita Lilla: Thank you. I love you, Julie.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Thank you for our conversation. [laughs]

Qanita Lilla: I love you. Thank you. [laughs]

Juliane Okot Bitek: Thank you for having me. And I hope -- well, what do I mean "hope?" We will continue talking.

Qanita Lilla: Yes, we will.

Juliane Okot Bitek: I love you, my friend.

Qanita Lilla: I love you too. Bye.

Juliane Okot Bitek: Bye.

[Music]

Qanita Lilla: Thank you for listening to *With Opened Mouths*. Special thanks to our guest Juliane Okot Bitek for speaking with us today. This podcast is hosted by myself, Dr. Qanita Lilla, and produced by Agnes Etherington Art Centre in partnership with Queen's University's campus radio station, CFRC 101.9 FM. The music is composed by Jamil 3DN and produced by Elroy "EC3" Cox III. Episodes of *With Opened Mouths* are released monthly, and you can find them on Digital Agnes, CFRC's website and on your favourite podcasting platform. If you liked what you heard, leave us a review and subscribe now so that you don't miss a single episode. We'll see you next time.

[Music]