

A Conversation with Kwame Dawes

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Maryemma Graham: The Project on the History of Black Writing at The University of Kansas is very pleased to present our first webinar, with poet Kwame Dawes as part of Black Poetry After the Black Arts Movement, a summer institute funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. More than thirty years ago, the Project on the History of Black Writing began its investment in preserving and recovering the history of black writing. Today we remain committed to creating critical spaces for teaching, learning, researching and presenting black literature both in the US and globally. Our very special guest today is Kwame Dawes, Chancellor's Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. I am Maryemma Graham, University Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Kansas. Let me briefly introduce you to our special guest today. Kwame Dawes is an internationally known, and award winning author. Since his first collection of poems in 1994, *Progeny of Air*, he has published more than thirty books. This phenomenal output includes collections of poetry, like *Requiem*, *Map Maker*, *Bruised Totem*, three collections in 2006 which include his *Wisteria: Twilight Songs from the Swamp Country*, *Impossible Flying* and *Brimming*. Since 2001, his identity as a U.S. writer has gained him an enthusiastic American audience. His most recent collection, *Duppy Conqueror*, is a collected volume containing new poems. He has also published fiction and non-fiction, and the definitive critical study *Bob Marley: Lyrical Genius*. Dawes' collaborative work and public engagement has led to highly innovative work with writers in Jamaica, the people of Haiti. Concurrent with his post as Chancellor's Professor of English at Nebraska, he is the Glenna Luschei editor of *Prairie Schooner*. There is much more I could say, a long list of awards, but we have an eager audience waiting, so please join me in welcoming Kwame Dawes to our first fall webinar for Black Poetry After the Black Arts Movement.

Dawes (2:24): Thanks for having me. It's good to be here.

Graham (2:26): Well we don't want to waste too much more time, but I didn't provide the audience with a personal biographical part of this sketch. And maybe people may not know, but let me begin by asking a more general and perhaps obvious question. From Ghana to London, Jamaica, Canada, South Carolina, and now Nebraska ... with at least half of your life in North America, you are the quintessential migrant. You said that yourself. And yet, you have said that Jamaica and Ghana are the most central spatial connections to you. How does this perspective and acknowledgement influence what and how you write and even think as a poet?

Dawes (3:10): I think what I define as a kind of identity which affects my writing and my sense of self and so on is the notion of being somebody, a pan-Africanist in the old traditional sense that I am a product of Africa, a product of the African diaspora. But my relationship with Africa, I think, is critical to me. You know my family has long connections to Africa, even on the Jamaican side. My father was actually born in Warri, in Nigeria. His parents were teachers from Jamaica at the turn of the last century, where they spent a couple of decades in Warri, in Nigeria. So my father was actually born there. And then my father moved to Ghana after living in Jamaica after he had finished University, and that's when he met my mother ... of course my mother is from Ghana. But at the same time, there's obviously that strong connection with Jamaica. And it turns out that now that I have left South Carolina I feel a great affinity to South Carolina, because of this very African connections in fact I think. I don't think it's

a stretch to say that the Gullah communities of the coast of South Carolina are probably the most African of people in the entire United States. So for me those connections are real and they just make sense for me and they make sense in my development of self, my development of my work, and my development of my identity. It's not a complication, I don't feel torn or anything like that. I mean it's my roots. As Bob Marley says "Roots Natty roots, Dread Binghi dread, I and I are the roots".

Graham (5:03): Let's talk a bit more about sort of literary roots here. You started your career with theater and you had a reggae band and you're drawn also to art. So how do all of these elements come together for you? Do they predispose you toward one form or several forms and others in your poetry?

Dawes (5:23): Yea, you know there is a point when I was at university many years ago when I was an undergraduate where I clearly felt I had an interest in theater. I was writing fiction, not necessarily well. And I was writing poetry, apparently not well. But I cared about these forms and I enjoyed literature as a whole. And I think there was a point where I was being advised, pick something and stick to it, and for some reason I decided against that. I decided that I would try whatever I'm doing, and if I can do it as well as you know, it needs to be done, then I will continue to do it and let the chips fall where they may. And so from that early stage, when I was about 18 or 19, I decided to be able to be free, to treat all art as my territory. And if I don't do it well, I'll let the experts do it, but if I might find myself doing it well then why not? I'll press on with it. And that has stood me in good stead. You know, I became a reggae musician when I went to Canada. In Jamaica I didn't ... I wasn't a reggae fan, I was in theater. And in Canada I was part of two reggae bands and we toured and we recorded and so on, but that's because this music was clearly defining who I was in America ... or was in North America ... was giving me a sense of identity and connection, but also giving me an aesthetic engagement with the art that I was fascinated by, which is Caribbean/African, and art that comes through that prism. And so for me, I don't have these lines of division. If I'm doing it fine, I do it fine. Yeah.

Graham (7:12): You mentioned the word "aesthetic" and a question has come along those lines. One of our goals in the summer institute was to really disrupt the notion of a single aesthetic, especially as it's applied to African-American poetry, other poetries after the Black Arts Movement. So when you use the term "reggae aesthetics", obviously showing a debt to Bob Marley in Jamaica. The question that has come is, are you sort of returning as to the Greek sense of the word of penetrating to things perceptible by the senses, things material as opposed to things thinkable or immaterial ...this is a quote. So how does that aesthetic operate? I guess, it seems to me when I'm reading *Duppy Conqueror* and other works that you are very much material: the physicality of the lines and the words and the tone. So can you talk a little bit more about reggae aesthetic as it applies to your thinking through and writing poetry?

Dawes (8:09): Yeah, I think it's a good question and one of the challenges when I wrote the book *Natural Mysticism: Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic*. I was exploring the idea that there existed a Eurocentric notion of "aesthetic" that came from the Greek traditions and so on and that was permeating our sense of value and our sense of artistic expression. And what I was trying to propose was that there were multiple aesthetics that existed, and that have predated what we call the European tradition, and in many ways aesthetics are constantly changing as they are constantly being reinvented for the moment. The aesthetic is essentially the same to me as a kind of mythology and it's an artistic mythology of meaning that gives a framework to what an artist is trying to do. That is what makes the work what it is and what is the beauty of the work and so it's Aristotelian in the idea that I'm exploring

the notion of beauty, but I recognize that what Aristotle may have constructed as beauty is quite different from what a reggae aesthetic or a blues aesthetic or the sun music aesthetic from Cuba and all the other forms would construct as beauty. So the quest for the artist I found, especially for me in engaging reggae, was to see what constituted beauty and by beauty I mean symmetry, a kind of ordering a kind of notion of what moves us, what transforms us and what defines us and what gives meaning to our existence. And so the quest for that was to begin to see where it existed in the music in this reggae music. And this reggae music has a wonderful complex of both the idea of the form itself, but a philosophical basis for the form. And it has its contradictions and it has its various dimensions. And what I was proposing is that contained in that was a definite African sensibility, and that African sensibility would affect the ways in which I would understand my work. So it's a weird thing because I wasn't given myself the criteria from which to work but I was trying to discover what was making me work. In other words I was looking at my work, looking at the work of Jamaican artists and musicians and I was looking at the work of African's and Caribbean people and saying: What do I see in them that I can formulate a theory around that makes sense? And of course this superseding notion of what reggae aesthetic looks like began to be the dominant factor. And it just gives meaning to me. So it's not prescriptive, it's larger descriptive and makes absolute sense to me.

Graham (10:46): Yeah and the fact that you do have so many influences just opens up more possibilities. I mean, we noticed that you constantly engaging other writers in your poetry.

Dawes: Yeah.

Graham: Derek Walcott, Langston Hughes... You are really going into the depths of the poetic legacy, whether it's on the U.S. side or the Caribbean side or the British side, so that's very interesting.

Dawes (11:07): I would say something quickly about that. That's the beauty of reggae ... because, you know this may sound funny, but the truth is reggae music has the capacity to be the filter through which all kinds of artistic expressions can come through, but once they enter that filter, they're transformed into this thing called reggae. So, one of the funniest moments for me was discovering some songs that I thought were originally written in reggae, and discovering that these were cover songs from other artists, and I just thought, "how?". For a long time, I wondered, "Why were they making these bad versions of these reggae songs?" When the truth is that the reggae versions I'd heard were the versions of these other songs. The point I'm making is reggae gives me - and it's a Caribbean... that's why it's a very Caribbean kind of aesthetic is that it gives you the framework through which all kinds of influences and sometimes contradictory impulses can enter, and yet create what Kamau Brathwaite calls "something torn and new". And for me, it's similar to Walcott's notion of "the sea is history". The sea's a locale that all kind of things can enter into, but yet something very distinctive emerges out of it that has it's own qualities of beauty. And I love that permission. I love the permission that I don't have to apologize to say. I'm doing my vershans - as in V-E-R-S-H-A-N - of Hopkins or my vershans of - because it's coming through the prism of my body and my culture and my experience to create something distinctive, new and wonderful.

Graham (12:43): Thank you. I'm going to invite the audience to give us some questions. If you are looking at your desktop, you will probably find it at the bottom of the screen. If you're on an iPad, you will find it at the top. Maybe this is a good time to read a poem that shows some of what you're talking about, if you would. And we have a number of poems that we can share with you. But I'll give people a

chance to bring some more questions to the screen. Again, bottom of the laptop or desktop, top of the screen if you're on an iPad.

Dawes (13:14): Okay.

Graham (13:16): So, what do you want to start with?

Dawes (13:18): I think I'll read a poem called "African Postman". We've been talking about reggae as an aesthetic. This is a poem for a man called Solomon Ephraim Woolfe, who I met in Ethiopia some years ago. I was there doing some work with the BBC on Haile Selassie and it took me into Sheshemane, an area that Selassie had set aside for Africans of the diaspora to settle. And I met this man, Solomon Ephraim Woolfe. "African Postman" is a reference to a song by Burning Spear. So here we go:

Son, who is dat?

Is de 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 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,
move along the roadside. Life happens here.
I am travelling to the land I have heard about,
Sheshemane, the green place, five hundred acres
of Jah's benevolence, and I know now that
I long to hear the rootsman tell me how,
despite rumours of his passing, the natty
keeps on riding, keeps on standing in the fields
of praise to hold onto the faith of roots people.
Brother Solomon, you put the name Ephraim
on your head and carry the face of the true
Rasta, the face of an Ashanti warrior, eyes deep
under heavy lids, and your skin tight as leather,
blacker dan black. I have met you before
on the streets of Kingston, there where 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, tell them
Return to the roots, the healing shall take place.
You are Burning Spear's voice in the fields of teff,
you tell me of the prophecy of Marcus,
and I listen to you, through the phlegm,
through the gruff of your voice, then 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 yardman greatness, and you speak
a mystery of those who have ears but won't hear,
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 doubters
scoff, let this 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 four hundred years of being told
he is homeless, has come home, yes, Jah,
has come home.

*Sons and daughters of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie,
Earth Rightful Ruler, without any apology say:
This is the time when I and I and I should come home,
yes, Jah . . . Nah leggo! Nah leggo! Nah leggo!*

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Yeah, thanks.

Graham (16:38) : Thank you, thank you very much. This is wonderful. That reminds me of a comment that was made by one of your critics after you published your first collection in the U.S. I think it was *Midland*? I believe it was the first by a U.S. publisher, and it won, of course, the Hollis Summers Poetry Prize. What changed after that in terms of your writing and thinking? You are in South Carolina now about the first seven, eight or nine years, so you have a sense of what change... but the critic says you're writing... you're meditating, that this is a meditation. So, and of course as you ended that reading, we entered that meditation with you. What is your sense of what changed, since 2001 at least when *Midland* was published?

Dawes (17:27): Well, people know me here in America, that's pretty much it. I mean in terms of my own work, it didn't change one bit. It was certainly weren't the first poems that I wrote about the South and about America ... I mean from as early as my second book of poetry, *Prophets*, I was writing about the

South. In fact from the first book, in *Progeny of Air*, some of the last poems in it are poems about South Carolina, about my encounters in Sumter. And in many ways poems like “Wisteria”, which would come afterwards ... but I wrote “Wisteria” in 1995. I mean most of the poems were written then. *Jacob Jacobus*, all of these poems, you know, were written out of my experience of trying to understand that new landscape. So the truth is, what changed was that America, sort of, went through its Columbus experience in discovering who I was ... but I... but nothing had changed. The same thing has happened with *Duppy Conqueror* appearing with Copper Canyon. And everybody is going “Who is this new guy?” I've been around, you know. I've published twenty books of poetry, so in many ways it's a continuation of my exploration of very similar themes. But there is a way in which *Midlands* continues the poetic theme of inheritance, where I'm looking at these literary and emotional and psychic inheritances that have given shape to my work. And I think people recognize that progression as well from that collection. But the truth is I .. me, not, people just knew who I was, that's all.

Maryemma (19:02): So your coming to America was America's discovery of you is essentially what you are saying?

Dawes (19:06): Yeah, yeah, yeah. Americans may not want to think that, but that's their business. (LAUGHS)

Maryemma (19:02): Well, we have a couple of particular questions. One of our participants this summer asked about 5, which is the number that is often missing or avoided in Ghana. Does this play into your choice of quintet or your engagement with August Wilson?

Dawes (19:28): No. (LAUGHS) The simple answer is no. In fact, the collection that has been used in my bio and so and so-forth, “August: A Quintet”, has changed its title. It's coming out next year with Northwestern, and it's called “City of Bones”. And it was called “August: A Quintet” for August Wilson obviously. All the poems in that collection, which is a fairly large sequence, come from ... are influenced by and are in conversation with the wonderful African-American playwright August Wilson, who I regard as just one of the great American playwrights, period ... one of the great American poets. And so I went through all his work ... in great study, and so on... and started to write poems in conversation with it. And they came in five sections so I was calling it a quintet as a kind of handle for it. But eventually I decided to go with “City of Bones”, which is that great image that he uses at the end of *Gem of the Ocean* and the idea of the bodies that have been consumed by the Middle Passage. And so that image became very resonant for me, because in many ways I see Wilson as a fantastic bridge and a true Pan-Africanist, and as a true poet of Africa and its diaspora ... and so my work seeks to engage with those elements. The five-thing, no, not really, it's just a number. (LAUGHS)

Graham (20:53): Okay well, I won't give a follow up because there is one. You engage in a lot of collaborative work and you've actually done an extensive interview with one journalist about the nature of collaboration. So, when you think of a piece being performed after it's written, then collaboration becomes very clear. So how does collaboration occur in the writing of a poem for you? Maybe, “Requiem”? You've talked about how Tom Feeling's *Middle Passage* inspired that poem. So is that kind of collaboration as well? So, how does collaboration really work in writing poetry?

Dawes (21:30): I think for me anyway, and I dare say for most poets, we are engaged in a kind of collaboration, whether we are engaged in a dance between life or experiences and what we do, the words that we write, or whether we are actually engaged in a conversation with other people's art. I

think there is a collaborative process that is taking place. But collaboration is a very funny word because collaboration, actually strictly speaking, presumes a back-and-forth. But more often than not, what is happening is work is presented, some form of it is presented and then somebody reacts to that work and creates something else. And I've worked in various forms of collaboration. There's a series of poems called "Ashes", which I did with an artist called... a photographer, a wonderful photographer called Andre Lambertson, who I have done a lot of journalistic work with. And he had done some work on inner-city youths and the violence of inner-city youths, the lives of inner-city youths throughout the US. And these are photographs. One day he sent me these photographs and they're very disturbing photographs to me and he said 'See what you can think, you know, you can get from this'. And I told him I didn't want the photographs because they were too disturbing. But I became haunted by these images and I started to write these poems as a way to contend with them. He took these poems and then created this wonderful video piece called "Ashes" which uses the photographs and the poems in this wonderful dialogue, which I read and performed. And that's a lively kind of collaboration because we're going back and forth. Sometimes I work with musicians and so I, my language has changed to fit with the music that they are working on. But here's my basic principle of collaboration. I like to work with people who are confident and skilled in what they do. And so that I can give them the space to do their work because I know what I'm doing as well. And when we bring these two forces together, we are not creating work that we had before. We're creating something new. And something distinctively new. And I find that very exciting and very useful. And a way to frankly, double up on the work that one is doing.

Graham (23:45): Ah, okay, well, we've got a flurry of questions coming in. I think partly that reading really inspired people to listen a little bit longer, but in talking about your reggae aesthetics, one question has to do with your feeling about the use of orthography and typography to represent the Caribbean language. Is this something that you actively support? You think that this is something that, you know, if you're teaching creative writing, poetry students, is this something that would be part of that process or the use orthography and typography in representing sound...

Dawes (24:21): It's a really interesting question, and a difficult question. I admire what the Haitians have done with Creole and they've found a kind of orthography and a kind of standardized orthography for Creole, which is wonderful, because of course it solidifies the sort of independence of that language and its management. The challenge of course with patois is ... one of the challenges of patois is that the continuums are so loose between what we call sort of standard Jamaican English and of course the basilectal, or the basic Jamaican patois. And because of those loose lines, it has taken a long time for us to arrive at a kind of standard orthography. I say a long time, but relatively speaking it's been a short time. In other words, we've been thinking about a Jamaican literature for less than a hundred years, if you want to be honest about it. *Constab Ballads* by Claude McKay was one of the first examples of poetry in the patois. And if we think of the evolution of the English from, say, *Beowulf* coming up to the *Gawain and the Green Knight* and we come to Old English into Chaucer and then moving from Chaucer to Shakespeare - we're talking several hundred years before... It would take another five hundred years - three to four hundred years - before English became what we call standard. So in many ways, I think that process is... We're doing a faster job of it with the patois. And the people who are doing a marvelous job like Carolyn Cooper, who writes articles in the newspaper in the patois using linguistic signs and terms that capture the phonetic language in very accurate ways. But for people of my generation, who learned the patois in writing, through writers who were doing different things to try to approximate something that looked like English, it takes a while to write in that form. But I think that's

changing. I think when you look at Linton Kwesi Johnson's last album and last book, he uses the same orthography that Carolyn Cooper has attempted to use. In my work, I don't. I don't use that as much, because I think I'm less - I'm struggling. I keep going along the continuum so I don't do that as much. But I support it and I think it's fantastic and necessary.

Graham (27:03): Okay, so, there is a view that performance sometimes disrupts the transmission of a poet's meaning. What do you say to that? You have obviously - you gave us a performance a few minutes ago. You've recorded your poetry. You work actively with the performance medium. Is there any truth to that? Or is there something else that goes beyond their performance provides?

Dawes (27:28): Well, no, I don't understand that idea. I mean, unless there's a coffeemaker nearby that makes it hard for you to hear the performer, I don't understand that. You know, this idea of performance versus what is written and so on ... it's the kind of argument that I find no use for, because I think all writing is a kind of performance. It's literally a performance and the truth is the best poems are those poems, as far as I'm concerned, and that has been proven over time, that have found a way to tabulate what is an oral experience. Poetry is essentially codified around a kind of orality. Now, there are practical reasons why having a recorded version of a poem in writing in certain shape and form, it might be interesting. It might give you all kinds of possibilities, because there are certain nuances that you can't achieve in performance. Similarly, there are certain nuances in performance that you can't achieve on the page. And all I see is multiple platforms upon which to explore my work, but I hope that my poems work just as effectively as a performance of the page as they do if I was to read the poems out loud, because I'm always thinking about sound ... I'm thinking about the music of it and so on. But I will also say that, look, I'm a good performer, so if you give me even the worst poem in the world, I could probably make it sound good. And that don't mean the poem is any good. It's just that I'm a good performer. So I'm not deluded by the nature of performance, but at the same time, there is something very rich and important. I'm saying a poem may not be good, but, you know, that so-called bad poem, in the performative moment, and the relationship between the artist and the individual, the context and so on, gives it its own resonance and its importance and its value and that should not be underestimated, but what I don't think you should do is to mistake those moments as defining unless you can replicate them again and again. You see, this is the nature of the thing: if it can only happen once, then it will only happen once. One of the things about recording and books and writing is that it's an attempt to replicate this moment again and again in a different form and that has its own demands and complications and challenges and so on. But instead of seeing these as obstacles or divides and so on, I see these as opportunities: opportunities of communication.

Graham (30:08): And then of course there's a question of the audience, as you say, the relationship between the individual, the audience and the poet - and the poem so that sort of triadic becomes really important through this other medium, so I would agree with that. Someone is channeling Lucille Clifton here in question, quoting from Clifton, "Africa/oh/home/the soul of your/variety, all of bones/remember" and I think you're mentioning the new title of your August Wilson book has brought that. So, do you consider contemporary diasporan poets' engagement with the continent a particular cultural movement with new pathways or an aesthetic or is it both?

Dawes (30:52): Well, it's not new. I mean (LAUGHS), that's one thing it's not. It's not new. This goes as far, I mean, for all the problems we may have, this engagement with Africa and locating it within the African-American or the African diasporic tradition is as old as the African diaspora. So, there's nothing

new about it. And I think what is happening is that the access that we're giving to more writing from Africa is making poets from the diaspora find ways to engage with that work some more. And that's been a problem. The big problem was that until we started the African Poetry Book Fund, where we'd publish African poets, there are very few places after Heinemann ended its series, there are very few places for us to find access to African poetry in significant numbers and in significant volume ... and there are very few opportunities for Africans to publish their own poetry. So there's been kind of a gap that has existed and one of the things that we've been doing in the African Poetry Book Fund is to bring African poetry to readerships who would like to engage in that aesthetic and engage in the poetics of that. But I don't think that African-Americans or people of African descent are just discovering that connection. It's a troubled connection for many of them and continues to be a complicated and complex relationship, but I would say that recognition of that connection is an enrichment to the kind of work, because it gives you a sense of possibilities and a sense of aesthetic and mythological and poetic breadth and sophistication that I think sometimes we fail to recognize.

Graham (32:51): Yeah so that the aesthetic relationship to that is what perhaps has changed. So there is, for instance, "What is Africa to me". That is one kind of response to that troubled relationship but new poets may enter that relationship in new ways. So that there's a newness about it, I guess you would argue, but it is not, in and of itself, new.

Dawes (33:10): Yeah, I don't think (LAUGHS)... I just don't think it's new. (LAUGHS) I mean, the one thing... By the way, my view has always been that this idea of newness is a cult. It's a cult of modernity that is a false cult. You know. And I think poets benefit from not being consumed by that cult. So the poets are always saying - a poet will come to me and I will say, "Well, what poets do you read? What are your influences? What tradition." "Oh no no no, this poem just come to me as is. I don't have no influence." I'm saying, "Well then, you have no roots." This notion, and then people say I'm a griot. Do you know what a griot is? A griot is probably the most trained, most locked-in person to a hundred, two hundred, three hundred years of tradition, of practicing something that has existed forever. It's not someone who just jumps on stage and says whatever they feel like saying. So this idea that we're doing something new, it's a nice one and it's a great thing if it happens, but most of the time, we think we are new, because we don't know anything else. So it's new to us. That's all it means. And I'm very, very tough about that. I think you get really depressed when you start reading other work that exists. You're gonna start going, "Why am I bothering?" That's a good place to start. (LAUGHS) That's a very good place to start.

Graham (34:35): Well, we want to hear you read more poetry and then talk a little bit more about what many people have posted questions about your practice as a poet, that is the world of poetry. So can you read a little bit more for us, please, and we will be very attentive to this.

Dawes (34:49): Okay. I think I'll read a poem called "How to Pick a Hanging Tree." It's a short-ish poem, which is written based in South Carolina.

HOW TO PICK A HANGING TREE

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

-- Lewis Allan

Young trees may look sturdy but they have no memory,
they are green so near the surface they bend with the sudden weight;
and the truth is that not all trees can carry a man's dead weight
with enough air between pointed toe and earth, with enough height
so the scent of rotting can carry far enough to be a message
for those who are sniffing the muggy air for news.

Old as it may look, craggy bark, twisted branches,
drooping limbs, old as it may seem, sitting there by the edge
of the canal, that live oak understands the simple rituals of hanging.
See, there is the natural notch where the rope will slip,
and hold, and here, the tree angled like this, the damp air
off the river carries the decay for miles and miles.

Sometimes, a fresh tree will simply die after the piss
of a dying man seeps into its roots. Sometimes a tree
will start to rot from guilt or something like a curse.
But the old trees seasoned by the flame of summer lightning
and hardened to tears, know it is nothing to be a tree, mute
and heartless, just strong enough to carry a man until he turns to air.

[© 2013, Kwame Dawes from *Duppy Conqueror*]

Graham (36:36): Just thinking about that for a moment. Thinking about that for a moment. (PAUSE) So let's get to the question of your practice as a poet in this larger world of poetry. You blog. There's this wonderful Twitter - the Twitter feed that you have - Memo to Poets. We love that! We circulated that among people.

Dawes (37:05): That's right.

Graham (37:06): And you edit, you produce - you created the poetry initiative at University of South Carolina that had active community engagement. You've also written about your concerns for the poet in the university. There's a long piece about that. Does the proliferation of creative writing programs extend the problem that you discussed in that piece? Is that an issue for you at all?

Dawes (37:27): No, not at all.

Graham (37:28): As a patron?

Dawes (37:32): No, not remotely. I really believe that, look, poets have always been patronized, and by patronized I don't mean looked down upon, but have depended on the patronage of others. Artists have always been patronized by society. Even in traditional societies the artist is given permission to do their work and it's supported by the society because the society values that work. The fact is that the creative writing programs that proliferate in America now, are essentially the new patrons of writers. Giving them somewhere they can get bread and butter and eat. And at the same time they can write. And it has the added benefit of enriching the lives of those people who are interested in writing literature and so on. I do not see this as a big problem. People like to go around saying there are University poets and then there are non-University poets. That's an economic discussion, that's not a discussion about aesthetics. I don't think that's a discussion about the art. I think it's presumptuous; there's a presumption that people who don't teach at Universities as poets are sort of more rooted and more grounded to the Earth and so and so forth. I don't buy that for a minute. I just see that as what the poet decides to do. Because the University never dictates what kind of poetry they are going to write. As long as you are in a creative writing program you are expected to write the poetry you are going to write. Now your economic circumstances and your class circumstances might be affected by the fact that you have that support. But in terms of what you're going to write and the kind of work that you're going to do, I don't believe that those questions arise. Now it's true that very, very often poets who are from one movement of poetry and poets who got committed to the idea of performance only and not publication can find no leverage and no movement in the University systems that depend on the idea of publication. And I think that can create those kinds of divides. But I think it's misguided to assume that all poets who enter into that kind of environment are locked into that kind of poetics and that kind of poetry. Nobody would accuse Quincy Troupe, for instance, of being a university poet, you know, because his work doesn't reflect that. And for all the work that Patricia Smith produces, she remains as profoundly engaged in the idea of performance as she has ever been. So I don't think those two things necessarily stand to reason. But part of the reason for that, of course, is the emergence of the African-American poet. Because I think American poetry has been transformed by [African-]American poetry. In fact the real game in town today is black poetry. Frankly. It's better than anything else that's out there and I have no apology about saying that. It's just too bad. Live with it, basically these are the best poets writing today. They're the most urgent, they're the most sophisticated, they're the most broad-thinking. Any kind of listing of American poets must include a significant number of African-American poets. If you want to talk about energy, life, dynamism, and just really stunning, defining poetry. That's the new reality. People just have to live with it.

Graham (40:53): I'm glad I'm doing a podcast here because I'm going to quote you on that.

Dawes (40:58): Please do! (LAUGHS) Do it all the time!

Graham (41:01): All the reasons for why and any kind of rationale ... The interesting thing about what happens when we do these institutes is that people really discover a sort of a tension between studying poetry and writing poetry. Is that, again, a real fact ...the tension between the writing of poetry and the teaching of poetry? The studying of poetry, and the teaching of poetry? Somewhere I read that you do see somehow that there may be tension between the two. Is it creating a better balance or what?

Dawes (41:40): Again, I like to challenge those notions. Because those notions are predicated on the idea that you are either born a poet or you can be made into a poet if you weren't born that way. I don't know about that. I don't know. I really don't know. But most of the time I've not met somebody who

was born a poet. I just haven't. I just haven't met that person. Every poet that I think is a really remarkable poet has grown out of paying attention to the traditions that have existed before them. They engage it. I think that idea of the communal connection to the past and to what has existed before and the respect for the form is necessary to any great art. And what is new can only be new in the face of that. In art you challenge that, and do something else. But you're doing something else with the understanding of that relationship. So I'm not convinced by that. Look, nobody, nobody, I mean I deal with my students all the time. If you wanted to be a great soccer player for instance, and you want to be a big soccer player, nobody thinks that you can just go on the field no matter what, and just start playing and be amazing. Nobody does, nobody would even accept that. They would say you have to train, you have to practice, you have to run up... You have to do all kinds of things. And it's when you have those basic skills, the fitness, the mobility and so and so forth. Then your own improvisation of abilities increase and expand, and then you can do magical things. But if you don't have the basic construction of the body being fit, the mind being fit, the mind knowing the game fully, you cannot improvise, you cannot be great. I play guitar. Now look, I can... if you give me... I can play a million songs, a lot of songs with three chords. But you know what, that's all I can do. Every song I play has to be three chords. And because there's only three chords that I know; if I knew eight chords, I have more choices. That to me is what training as a poet is. It gives you options. It allows you... If I'm improvising and all I have is three chords, I can only improvise three chords! But if I have eight chords, I have more options in my improvisation. And for me that, that to me is why we practice. What is training? I never went to school to be a creative writer. I don't know; I never did a creative writing class. My studies are in academia. I didn't... I learned by studying the work of other poets. I've read... I went to the library. I read books and books and books of poetry. I studied their work. I read plays and plays and plays and I studied the work. I used to go into the theater, when theaters were in rehearsal and watched directors directing. And that's how I learned the craft. I learned the craft by watching others do the craft. That's what creative writing programs are about. They're about making you a student of the form. And I'm not saying that they exist as an institution and that validates it. But I'm saying what it's supposed to do is what all artists have done forever. The notion that artists just one woke up one day and started to write, that's nonsense. That's a story we like to tell people so that we can look magical. But we're not magical.

Graham (44:55): We are magical people, we do know that. We are magical people.

Dawes (45:00): Yeah of course we are. (LAUGHTER)

Graham (45:03): A couple of your projects have gained a lot of attention and that is your "Hope: Living and Loving with AIDS in Jamaica", [HIV/AIDS] in Haiti. Those projects are very special to you. But they come out of, again, your practice with poetry and with other poets. When we think about a poet like Langston Hughes, who came under fire, at least at that point in his, at an earlier point in his career, for being "a social activist". And that somehow meant that he was less committed to his craft as it were. So how does that sort of, fit with you? This notion of, through poetry you can pretty much do whatever you want to do. There are no limitations as you said in the beginning.

Dawes (45:43): Well, you can do whatever you want to do, but there's a price you're going to pay, and you have to decide whether you want to pay that price ... I it's important enough for you to do it, is my point. Quite clearly, there's the presumption that if I've written poems about ... if somebody says to me, 'What are those poems in 'Live, Hope, Love' about?' and I'll say, well, they're about HIV/AIDS. That's a shorthand. If I didn't say that and somebody read the poems, they may not necessarily say that as the

first thing that comes to mind. So the shorthand has come about because of the context in which these poems are written. And the truth is when I went to Jamaica to interview people with HIV/AIDS, I wasn't going there to write poems. I was going there to write articles. Which I did, I wrote long form articles, did documentary work, and so on. But at night, I was haunted by these conversations and as a poet, I needed a way to articulate that, that experience. So in many ways those poems are no different from any of the poems that I write. Whether it's a poem that I'm angry at my wife, or I'm afraid of a situation, it's just as much a part of what drives me to the page, as these poems that I wrote about these peoples. So for me, the test of those poems is not necessarily in their efficacy as an articulation of protest or an articulation of social concern. But in their efficacy as poems. In other words, do they find beauty in language and do they articulate experience in the most succinct and beautiful way. Here's the thing I believe. That when poetry achieves that, it is revolutionary, it is transformative ... and it is humanly stunning. So that's what I'm still looking for. And I never pretend that my person, my humanity, is divorced from my art. That would make me a liar. I'm a believer, I'm a Christian believer. If I deny that in my own poetry, then I'm lying in my poetry. But my faith is a complicated contradictory faith, and that's going to come out in my poetry. So the truth is really a quest for what is true, what is sincere and what is honest. And our art allows us to do that.

Graham (48:06): There is one other question about poetry and publications about poets becoming unavailable, but I'm gonna get shot If I don't let you do more reading. So I'm going to defer, if you will, to doing a bit more reading and perhaps we can end in talking about the unavailability of some poetry that we really would love and the necessity of having more publishing outlets.

Dawes (48:29): Alright I'm trying to decide what to give these folks for the last poem that I'll read, if it's the last poem.

Graham (48:37): No, not make ... how about "Black Funk"? I love that one. You didn't include "Inheritance" in here though you've mentioned it here which is one of my favorites, but it's also long.

Dawes (48:46): Which one?

Graham (48:47): Inheritance. You talked about it.

Dawes (48:48): "Inheritance" is too long.

Graham (48:49): Yeah it's too long.

Dawes (48:50): Let me do Black Funk.

BLACK FUNK

The rigid of my jaw bone
is power forged in the oven
of every blow I have felt.
My water walk is something like
compensation for a limp.
Don't begrudge me my sashay
walk, it's all I got sometimes.

'Cause I know the way you stare,
pale blue eyes like a machete edge
catching the colour of new sky,
the way you barely whisper
your orders, spit out the food,
complain about my shuffling gait,
snorting out my funky smell,
find fault in each task I do,
never right, never good enough,
curse my children like dogs,
cause I know you just hurting
drooling your bitterness
when my back is turned,
when the shape of my black ass
swings that way you hate,
sashaying through this room of daggers.

I know you're wondering what I've got
down there, in my belly, in my thighs,
make him leave your side,
crawl out of his pale sick skin
and howl like a beast at night,
whimper like a motherless babe
suckling on me, suckling on me

You can't hide the shame you feel
to know I sometimes turn him back.
I know you know it, from the way,
he comes on you hard and hurried,
searching for a hole to weep his soul in—
yes, I turn him back when I want,
and he still comes back for more.
I've got my pride sometimes.

I know the way you try to read me
try to be me, can't be me,
never be me, never feel the black
of me, never know the blues in me,
'cause you never want to see you
in me even though we bleed together,
finding each other's tidal rhythms
and bloat together like sisters,
hoarding the waters of the moon together

So I sashay through your life,
averting the blades with my leather skin.

I abuse you, and when he bawls,
that is my pride at work,
all I've got sometimes.
I'll cook your meals
until he keels over,
and you just have to take it
'cause I took it with no fuss
when he forced his nothing self on me,
while my babies sucked their thumbs
within the sound of my whimpering;
I paid baby;
I'm just reaping what y'all done sowed

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Graham (51:09): Beautiful, beautiful. Thank you. I think we can do one more poem. I don't wanna let this go. It's just that we're in the mode here.

Dawes (51:20): (Laughs). Alright I'll do a small poem at the end which is "In this Saying"

Graham (51:23): Yes, Yes

Dawes (51:25): ... and this is a poem of course for my wife Laura.

IN THIS SAYING

i

There is a way to end books;
the gathered papers, their weighty
gift—the clean parade of words

in columns of paragraphs and in columns
of images—the tidiness of things—
and numbered, they form the thing

you have labored over for years.
To end a book, you tie a blue ribbon
around the heft, make a bow, kiss it.

ii

The way to end the year of cataclysms
is to find a piece of land by water,
where old boats rot at the edges,

and the place smells of ancient things,
sulfur, salt, rotting fish, and
the deep musk of mud and grass.

To then sit on a moving jetty,
rocking against the universe's
pulse, and there wait for the moon.

iii

To end this way alone, is to end
with the hollow melancholy
of loss and regret. Better to end

with the voice of your woman—
for you will need that voice
ordinary as rain, talking your name.

Perhaps it is the intrusion of her scent
filling the air, or the cool of her touch
slick with tomato pulp and herbs.

iv

I know the gender
of this poem, do not
worry, it is because

I know the name
of the bodies standing
in the dusk by water:

Kwame and Lorna.
They will hold hands,
and in this saying, the poem ends.

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So, that's it

Graham (53:07): Thank you, Thank you. We don't know how to clap publically on this interface, but we've got lots of ... at least 45 plus people are listening intently. I want to ask aside from the August Wilson work that we expect to see very soon, knowing that you work on multiple projects at the same time, what else are you working on?

Dawes (53:29): Of my own work, you know I'm working on a couple of novels. I'm working on ... there's multiple collections ... the truth is I don't have to write a poem for the next 20 years. I have all these manuscripts waiting to be published, but that won't stop me. But my real excitement is the work that I'm doing as an editor, the work that I do for Peepal Tree Press publishing Caribbean writers and Caribbean poets and the work that I'm doing with the African Poetry Book Fund. We're publishing by coming next year we'll be publishing five to six full volumes of poetry each year. We're publishing eight to ten chap books by African poets and so on. That work excites me and, of course, the work that I'm doing with *Prairie Schooner* is very exciting to me. So, you know, if I was to start listing all the things that I'm doing I would get tired so I just don't think about it. I just do the work that has to be done. It's very exciting.

Graham (54:22): And we get excited waiting for them to appear.

Dawes (54:25): Yeah, man, dem soon coming man. (LAUGHS)

Graham (54:30): This has been very exciting. Those of you who don't know, the poems that were read today are available .. we made them available in pdf so you can download. So we really thank everyone for joining us. I don't know the count, but I know at least 45 people were on our webinar. Some people log on, but perhaps bring classes, which means that there are more people in the audience than just the person who logged on. I've enjoyed this. I can speak for everybody else, I think, in saying that we all have. And we hope that we will ... this is a great way to kick off, of course, our webinar series for Black Poetry at the Black Arts Movement. We have a webinar schedule almost complete. Others are to be announced, but you will see that ones that are coming, and we hope that you will invite your colleagues to join us the next time. You may find out more about the Project on the History of Black Writing on our website and follow us on Twitter and our blog spots. I'm looking to see when our next seminar is, and it looks like we have Nikki Finney in November. Nobody in October so far, but keep looking because we are posting every day, and this is the place to look for them. We'd like to thank the KU ERMAL Garinger Academic Resource Center staff, especially Keah Cunningham and Jon Perkins. We are giving you shout-outs for making today's webinar possible. A special thanks to our special guest Kwame Dawes for being here today. Most of all, thanks to each of you for sharing this exciting event with us. Do not forget that a downloadable podcast from today's webinar will be available on our website soon. We will see you with the very next podcast listed now for November 11th with Nikki Finney at 3 pm EST (2 pm CST, 1 pm MST and 12: 00 PST), but there may be ones before then. Thank you and have a good rest of your day.

Dawes (56:45): Thank you.