



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Juliet Gilkes Romero.

(Music plays)

The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper. And I'm Pauline Walker. We created The Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page, and screen about their lives, work, and artistic practice. We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

Patricia Cumper In this podcast, we're in conversation with award-winning playwright, Juliet Gilkes Romero. She's of Caribbean descent, was born in East London, and grew up in Suffolk. She's been a television journalist with the BBC, reporting from countries like Cuba, Ethiopia, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. But she left the corporation to become a full-time writer. Juliet Gilkes Romero, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Juliet Gilkes Romero Hello and thank you very much for having me.

Pauline Walker You're welcome.

PC We've got lots of questions for you.

JGR Yes. Excellent.

PC Right, so let's begin. I'm always curious about a writer's early years. And I know you've come from a pretty remarkable family. Tell us a little bit about your childhood.

JGR I can honestly say that I had a very good childhood, maybe because my parents were so - they really deviated from the culture into which they were born. I think of them as revolutionaries in

many ways. And I think that they were drawn together through politics and wanting to change the way that we live and the way that we respond to life. So, dad was from Barbados, mum was from Trinidad. They met in London. It was an accidental meeting in that mum had - she had been nursing and had come up to London for the day and got lost on the underground. And my dad's aunt met her. Mum was asking for directions. I think it was to the British Museum. And my dad's aunt took a real shine to her and invited her over for tea. And dad turned up. I love that because it just shows you how random it's like, that the kind of like revolving doors of life, and that's how they met. But they were different. And they had this idea that - I think in a very traditional Caribbean domestic situation, children are to be seen and not heard, and my parents really believed that it was the adults who had to earn the respect of the children. So, we were always invited to express our point of view. If we had a question, it was always answered. Always. You know, it was never "I don't have time for this." And I think from that point of view that they were really different. And I really - I think my brother and I really enjoyed that about them. And if they had dinner parties, we would join in and, you know, our opinions and what we had to say were listened to. There were always books in the house. They didn't specifically teach us how to read, but they just left books around at ankle-biter level so that we didn't have to reach up to a bookshelf. They were just there when we were crawling around. So, they have a collection of books which were just full of crayon marks. They were both into poetry and mum was particularly into Percy Bysshe Shelley, and I now have her book. She's let me keep it on my shelf, and it's just covered in scribbles from my brother and I. But at some stage she would have sat there and read it, but they thought that that was the best way to get us interested in books and words, so it was never, you know, "This is reading time now." We were just allowed to play and discover.

PW So when did words and stories actually become important to you? What were the first things that you wrote?

JGR Again, I think it was because my brother and I, we were surrounded by books. And also, my parents - I think because there wasn't a lot of children's literature in terms of the African diaspora and black histories and black stories, there were a lot of adult books around. So, you know, I'm talking about Maya Angelou, you know, for a four-year-old, it would be considered quite adult, or E. R. Braithwaite. But these were the books that we started reading because there wasn't anything else, I think, that my parents thought we would really be inspired by. So, we would start opening these books and asking a lot of questions, really. I do recall *Alice Through the Looking Glass* being brought home one time, just left for discovery. And I remember scribbling in that and then eventually reading it, and then actually trying to write a musical from it. My mum swears she's got this manuscript upstairs in her attic. But I think the first book that I really remember reading and actually as a young child thinking, "I want to do this," it was *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. I was - I mean children have such imaginations. It just - it blew me away. I've always had a love of language and, again, I think that comes from my parents. My dad would just recite poetry. The education in the Caribbean was - was really very good. And it had to be because, you know, in order to pass British exams, the standard was inflated, which meant that a lot of Caribbean children - I mean they're educational ability was extremely high. And dad, to his dying day, could quote Milton and Shakespeare and all kinds of poetry. So, I'm going off on one slightly. But -

PC But, no, I can attest to the Caribbean education. I mean I did the romantic poet side with Milton. I did Shakespeare.

JGR Yeah.

PC You know, it's - but, yeah, we were expected to know these things. And, you know, when you come to England, it has one context. But in the Caribbean, it's simply the words. It's the beauty of the words that you see. So (overlapping conversation) I'm taking this slightly different direction because I know you trained and worked as a journalist, and that's a very different way of telling a story. So, what do you think you gain from working as a journalist? And was there a sort of frustration about telling stories that way?

JGR I - again, once I kind of like, really, you know, realised how much I love storytelling, how much I love words, I was very interested in human stories. And I would watch the news and see real life unfold. And by the time I was in my mid-teens, I wanted to be a reporter, whether it was in radio or TV, because I wanted to travel and be a correspondent. But what irritated me about what I saw on our TV screens at the time is that you never saw any black reporters. It was always the white gaze, white reporters, in the darkest - in darkest Africa reporting on the natives or so that's how it felt to me as a child. And I always - and I kind of wanted to - I thought, "Well, I've got skin in that game. I want to be able to tell these stories, too, but from my perspective as a young black girl." So, I remember, I was still at school and I got my mum to apply for the application pack, the BBC reporters pack. I was too young to apply for it, but I wanted to know what they were looking for. And I ended up - my first degree was in linguistics. My favourite element was social linguistics. And my thesis was on the - it was a social linguistic analysis of the Westland affair. Leon Brittan was the Home Secretary and he lost his job over this. It was about big battles where the - Margaret Thatcher would take on the American Sikorsky helicopters or the European Westland helicopters. But the language in the newspapers, because Leon Brittan was Jewish, was quite disgraceful at the time. I interviewed newspaper journalists and collected all of these articles and wrote my thesis out of that. And when I applied to the BBC - and I remember being sat before, like, four senior white journalists, and I know that they were very taken aback by this young woman who had done all this research because I didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge, and I joined BBC - the training schemes with quite privileged trainees who had, you know, come from these universities and who had been, like, captain of a hockey team, had never really shown an interest in journalists, but because of privilege - you know, I'll say it straight out. You know, and because of their education, they were getting through all these schemes. And I competed with them, but I was able to demonstrate an absolute fascination with language and journalism and the way that tabloids and so-called quality newspapers handled stories at the time. When I arrived at the BBC, particularly at Bush House, it was really rigorous and it was a fight because, again, you know, there were very few black faces. I mean we have forty language services, but in the main newsroom where all the editorial control was at the time, I mean there were, like, three of us. Well, I was the only black woman. And so, it was a real battle to make yourself heard and to get your editorial views put across. But the training was rigorous and I learnt a lot from that, and a real respect for research and editorial correctness, getting it right, because I had to. I eventually left the BBC in 2010, but I became very dismayed by the way

that conflict was covered, by the way that news - that the whole thing had become, you know, this extravaganza. But behind these headlines and all the graphics, people were dying, and I didn't feel that we were getting that kind of like 360-degree view of what war and conflict meant for all parties. And a lot of our correspondents, to be honest, they were trapped in hotel rooms. And, you know, not only was it dangerous for them to leave, but, again, because of the explosion of media, you know, you could be in your hotel room and you'd have, like, Radio 5 live, 10 - at 10 AM - by, you know, 10 past 10, you're doing News24, then you're doing the World at One, then you're getting ready to do a prerecord for PM. And so, it was a constant recycling of events but without the on-the-ground - you know, talking to people who are affected by these things. And I remember, you know, as a news producer back in London having to, you know, collate all of this and get it in the gallery, put it out as a live news bulletin, feeling that "Yeah, this isn't what I kind of signed up for."

PW Let's move on to some of your plays. We love *At the Gates of Gaza*. We're plotting to have it re-staged, and later we're going to present an excerpt from it.

JGR Yes!

PW We'd love to know what inspired you to write it and what was the process of getting it from your head on to the stage.

JGR So, again, this funnels back to my experience in the newsroom. I was at BBC World, and editorial policy is that our presenters on BBC World do not wear poppies. And I remember speaking to a news editor about this and saying, "Well, this doesn't make sense. I mean we're broadcasting to the world," you know. And his answer was, "Well, the audience won't understand what a poppy is," which made me incredibly angry because all across the Caribbean, across Africa, the Middle East, there are cenotaphs. British people, black British people, Caribbean people lost their lives fighting for empire, First World War and Second World War. And I tried to get this policy overturned with absolutely no success. And I remember telling, you know, my then line manager, "Black troops fought." You know, we know about the New Zealanders. We know about the Australians. They were called ANZACs. We know about Gallipoli and those campaigns. What about the British West Indies Regiment? And he looked at me blankly. He'd never heard of the British West Indies Regiment. And I was battling with educated editors who just didn't know this history. Shortly after that, I took a sabbatical and I went off to Goldsmiths to - I really needed a break from news. And I decided to write about the First World War. And I went to the Imperial War Museum, and they were brilliant. I mean that because I used to go so often that they'd get me a desk and bring out the diaries of men who had died during - there were three Middle East campaigns in Gaza. And that was overwhelming in many ways because, you know, I realise I was taking on a subject that could in many ways bury me because it was so important. And this was lived experience that I was reading, and often tragic lived experience. But, you know, I began researching and writing this very much from a point of anger. To have those veterans so dismissed - and, Pat, you will know this. You know, these veterans from the First World War, these were the ones who were so mistreated. When they went back to the Caribbean, they were the ones who brought in the winds of social change. They

formed the trade unions. When they went back, they couldn't sit in the front pews in the church. They had to sit at the back. And having sacrificed on the battlefields in the First World War, they knew that that wasn't right.

PC No, no, I completely agree with you.

JGR Yeah.

PC That's when a huge, huge social change happened.

JGR It was -

PC Even Marcus Garvey began the war saying, "Go and fight. Prove your men." And by the third year of the war, he was saying, "Come back home. This is not your war."

JGR Exactly. You know, and - so basically, he wrote letters to the King at the time saying, "Look, we are here and willing, you know, lines of the empire, you know, to defend the empire, fight for democracy." And eventually our black troops were allowed. That was after the death toll in Europe had begun to seriously rack up. But eventually, they formed the British West Indies regiment, the majority of whom - so they were allowed to fight in the Middle East, and they were allowed to fight there because the enemy at the time on the battlefield were Turks. It was still not considered acceptable for black men to fight white men on the battlefields of Europe even though they were the enemy. So, you know, those who followed the British West Indies Regiment, who ended up in Europe, tended to be in artillery regiments ferrying artillery and also removing injured people. But in the Middle East campaigns, they were allowed to fight, but they were only allowed to fight the Turkish enemy. And many of them were distinguished, won medals for bravery. They fought under George Allenby. And to be told that, you know, BBC presenters who work - you know, who are in vision broadcasting to the world can't wear a poppy because an overseas audience in the Caribbean and Africa won't know what a poppy is, that was outrageous.

PC Deeply infuriating, deeply infuriating. But -

JGR That made me so angry.

PC But when you're writing a play - I mean you talked about being, not at the bottom of the pyramid, but, you know, being one of the worker ants at the BBC. But when you're a playwright, you're in a very, very different relationship. So, I want to have you talk a little about what the relationship is with the dramaturg, with the director, with the actors in the process of making a piece of theatre.

JGR Obviously *At the Gates of Gaza* is a historical piece, and I felt so strongly that this needed to be dramatised. And that's where the excitement really erupted because it was a director at the time called Steven Luckie. I think he was a reader at the Royal Court. He started his own production company. And the only reason why *At the Gates of Gaza* saw the light of day because it had been read by people. It was read at the National, it was read at the Royal Court. And a lot of people were like, "This is great," but no one were prepared to get behind the production and put their money where their mouths were. Everyone kept telling me, "This is a great play," you know, and it became a bit frustrating. So, I wrote this when I was taking my sabbatical, when I was at Goldsmiths. Took seven years, and that's because Steven Lucky, this young black director, absolutely loved this play and the story it was trying to tell. And so, we brought on a dramaturg, a young guy at the time, Neil Crutchfield and brought in actors to workshop it. And, for me, moving from news into theatre, to be in a rehearsal room, to be able to do R&D with people who were taking apart of the script, and actors who understand your subtext. Not only do they understand what you're saying, but they also understand what you're not saying. That is what really blew me away. It was that netherworld between the seen and the unseen. That, for me, it's the real excitement of drama and it was as if these young actors could actually read my mind. And I remember one R&D, a lot of them were quite - they were laughing. And I thought, oh my goodness, they're laughing at - I don't know why they're laughing, but it's because they found the humour in the piece. And I'd hadn't set out to write a piece that was humorous, but what I'd managed to do was to write tragedy and humour together, which is terribly important. So, you've got these young men from the British West Indies Regiment. They're overheating. You know, it's - there are insects running around, and they're getting on each other's nerves. And the actors really were able to tap in to the humour and the tragedy of their situation. Because to be able to carry a story which is about conflict and is about why do we fight? Why do we kill each other? Why do men have to lose their lives? Why are these young black men prepared to risk all for empire? For them to be able to find that within the rehearsal room was so enlightening to me. What you don't get from screenwriting courses or a lot of them at the time was that opportunity to be in the room with the dramaturg and actors and a director to really wrangle the script because that's how you learn. Because there's no hiding on stage. You know, you can't edit your way out of trouble.

PC But, but, but I have to say, you're being very lovely about your actors. But having read the play, and both of us felt this, what was lovely is the detail. I could hear from what they said who was Bajan, who was Trinidadian, who was Jamaican. And it was in just the way they said instead of him, he or she, just rhythms of the language that we use. And there's a real clear specificity in it, which I think - that attention to detail, I really, really loved.

JGR Well, that's the beauty of our diaspora. People think of the West Indies as the West Indies. We know it was these islands. And there's that fantastic Derek Walcott poem. And, my goodness, I can't remember the words, but he talks about the fragmented pieces of a vase, of a broken vase, but how it's more beautiful when it's pieced back together. And that's our history and our legacy, and that's what I was trying to recreate, these fractured voices and distinct voices from all of the islands, with the way that they express themselves and the rivalries and the rhythm of their lived experience and spoken word. That was so exciting to me. And, again, because I knew that people in general, audiences, they don't know that about us as West Indians. You know, they don't get to experience that. So, to try to recreate that on stage was a real challenge and a joy. And the other thing that I would say about - because I know that - I do believe in being very specific. I do believe in detail. Those are my tent poles, if you like, and I use them very deliberately. But once I've done the research - and that's what I learned, particularly when I was doing the MA, is that you have to throw the research over your shoulder. You channel it. And then you to have the faith and the belief that it will express itself through the motivations and the emotions and the desires of your characters, because otherwise, it becomes a history lesson. Otherwise, it becomes very didactic. And I never want my work to be that. I want it to be an emotional roller coaster experience that absolutely draws the audience into that crucible of witnessing a recreation of a moment in time. And, yes, it was through that experience that I've learnt to absorb the research and then let it go, which is - I think it's easier said than done because you can get attached to certain things. But, you know, you can't - and, again, it comes down to exposition. You've got to let it go so, you know - and then fall in love with your characters, and, you know, whether it's Styles, Patterson, Fairchild, you know, Big George, that they -

PC Oh, I'm glad you mentioned Big George. He was my favourite.

JGR Oh, I love that guy.

PW *At the Gates of Gaza* tells the stories of volunteers soldiers of the West India Regiment as they fought in Palestine during World War I and their subsequent treatment once the war was over. This excerpt is set in the trenches where four soldiers are pinned down and desperately looking for hope.

Reading [excerpt from *At the Gates of Gaza*]

JGR I was very taken with Milton's "Samson Agonistes". And there's a line from that poem, "Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves". And Samson was betrayed, tortured, and blinded by people who he had believed in. And for me the allegory of *At the Gates of Gaza* was in these troops, some of whom stowed away to fight for the empire, join the British West Indies Regiment, and then arriving in this biblical landscape, you know, where, you know, Patterson being a religious man could see that landscape and tries to inspire them through those bible stories. And he talks about Samson's - because you can see Samson's ridge from where the troops actually were kind of entrenched. And that was really important to me. And allegory is really important to me.

PC To find the core, I guess, of that story, the thing that drives it. That's -

JGR It really helps me. It really, really helped me because then I realised it was like a sandstorm. These men are blind. They don't know where they are or why they're there. They're losing sight, you know, of what has taken them to this place, this battlefield in what was Palestine.

PC The other interesting thing, and I don't know if you did this deliberately, but the use of water, that they were thirsty, that they desperately needed water. And the one character who had water, who thought he was slightly better because he'd been raised in England, offered that water to the white officer and not to his fellow...

JGR Yes.

PC Black soldiers. And just the - again, the allegory. The way that imagery was used, I thought, was - it was subtle but it was lovely. I really enjoyed that.

JGR What was - I think what was shocking to me was when I got hold of the diaries that they allowed me to read at the Imperial War Museum, they all talked about water and the lack of it. So, again, it was using that - it's that battlefield experience. Because, again, I'm a woman. I've never been in battle, and that's where I think the research was really important. But then that, you know - as I've said, we then have to release that and know and appeal to our male and female sights. We - you know, I think we have everything within us and it's all ancestral as well. I have no fear about writing about men or men at war because I really do feel from an ancestral point of view and from a very - a DNA point of view that those stories are built within us. We don't have an issue there. And you know that, Pat, as well, because, (overlapping conversation) ...

PC Absolutely. And, you know, oddly enough, I watch sport, the way that we play sport, and I sit, sometimes in the Fijian sevens team as well, that there is a kind of DNA instinct to combat, to competition. And, yes, I understand that completely. We had another writer, Alex Wheatle, who said to us that he thought it was a kind of ancestral memory that we carried with us.

JGR I absolutely believe that. And that allows me to tackle anything. And it helped me as a journalist as well because I never felt that I had no business being in a room with certain politicians, or travelling to Mexico or wrote a play about Mexico for the RSC, *Day of the Living*. I wanted to be there. I didn't want to be an armchair writer about the 30,000 who disappeared in Mexico. I had to be there because I knew that somewhere in our ancestral memory. We know what it is to be removed, displaced, disappeared, ignored. Yeah, and I will expound (overlapping conversation) -

PC And that - you see, that brings us back around to that thing you said about these young men finding the humour in the desperate situation. It is very much a Caribbean response that if I don't laugh, I cry.

JGR Yes.

PC You are in the most desperate situation so you find a humour that, dry as it is, it manages to get you through the situation. And it's very much in all the drama, and you can feel in the writing of people of Caribbean descent. So, I get to ask the cheeky question now. And we're really lucky that we get to ask writers this. When are you a Black writer? And is this a label that you accept or reject? How do you feel about that?

JGR I think that this is a really good question. I mean I love August Wilson, so, you know - and reading August Wilson - and, again, I haven't heard about August Wilson until I got to Goldsmiths, and I was blown away by the man and, you know, his mission, if you like. But he talks about himself as an artist like Picasso and wanting to - he paints for himself, but he's writing for Picasso's audience. And I find that absolutely fascinating and I can see where that comes from. But I have to say that I know that I write as a black woman. My identity is so important to me because that identity has been so challenged and has been so undermined through my own lived experience. I've witnessed it travelling as a journalist, where a black woman's identity or a black person's identity can become extremely fluid and often undercut with a current of shame. So, I've worked a lot in Latin America, where if you open a newspaper and you see a job advertisement, you know, it says you have to be of good appearance. And what that means is that you have to have what they call good hair and you have to have a certain complexion. And I know that that is still the case in certain parts of Latin America. And that made me very angry and I would tell people, "Soy negra. I am a black woman. Soy negra," because that's not what they expected to hear. Because often in those circumstances Cuba had to be one of the only places where that was slightly different because of the politics of the country and how Cuba kind of erupted, and where working-class black people, rural black people were given an opportunity by the political system. In other parts of Latin America, particularly Brazil and Columbia and in Mexico, they've got an African-Mexican community who's completely at the bottom of society, taught not to be proud of their heritage. And in seeing that, that brought out my fighting spirit. It brought out my fire. It made me realise - and I think that - so I first started travelling to Latin America in the 90s. And I think before that, I didn't really think about the diaspora and my place within it. But when I was outside of the country, I saw it in sharp relief. And, for me, it's indisputable. And I began reading Zora Neale Hurston, and I love her work. And she, I think it was in the 20s and 30s, began travelling to Haiti, places like Haiti to gather and collate that diasporic voice and the mythologies and the stories of our African peoples who had been dispersed throughout the Caribbean. And, again, that really underscored for me who I am as a writer. I'm a black female writer. Soy negra. And -

PC I really like that. I'm going to borrow that, if you don't mind.

JGR Soy negra. That's never going to change.

PC But there is - you see that that's what comes through when you're writing very strongly to me, and it's not overwhelming. It's not strident, but there's a kind of righteous anger at the back of your writing for me. That's what I read. That's what resonates with me. Is that what drives you to choose the subjects that you choose?

JGR I think it does. And I think that's really important. I think that we must write from our lived experience, but not be afraid to move out of it. So, when I move out of it - so, for example, when I've travelled to Belfast, I've travelled to Mexico, but always as black female writer or journalist. So that's when my identity is really important to me. But also, I know that people will talk to me because of my identity, particularly marginal groups or refugees, and, you know, people who don't have a voice. They see me travelling, particularly with a BBC microphone; they'll come and talk to me because it's so unusual to them. And they also know that I possibly mirror their experience. And it's something that I've gained from my parents because, as I said, I mean, you know, that they were political. They used to belong to the West Indian Standing Conference. Their meetings would occasionally be raided by police. You know, they met Maurice Bishops, Grenadian leaders and people and we know what happened to these people who wanted to explore a socialist political reality for their (overlapping conversation) Caribbean countries.

PC And the socialist reality. It was a socialist reality that was not dictated either by Cuba or Russia. And I think that's what - why they got caught in the middle. It was a pincer move. You know, they -

JGR It was a pincer move.

PC Because he was a completely original thinker, Bishop. He had an idea which would have been wonderful for an island economy.

JGR Yes.

PC And it was spreading regionally as well, which is I think is why they were so afraid of it.

JGR And that's why they put a stop to it. But I have to say, I mean I remember being in Cuba, in Santiago de Cuba, seeing this huge statue to Maurice Bishop. I was stunned. And to know that young Cuban people know about Maurice Bishop. And if you went to Brixton and asked young Black people who Maurice Bishop was, they wouldn't know, you know. And that saddens me. I think this is why we need to write. You know, you, myself, Pauline, we need to write. People need to know where our animus comes from. And, for me, it was sitting around the dinner table with my parents. You know, I'd be woken up to see Muhammad Ali fight. I knew what was going on in Grenada. I knew what was going on in Northern Ireland. You know, my mum had Bobby Sands' green book, which wasn't allowed at the time. But you know - and she got it from a black bookshop in Brixton. So, there were a lot of ideas that were brought home and which were very much in contrast to the very conservative upbringing that they had in the Caribbean, which that was the case, you know, even after independence. You know, I think that there was a conservative movement in the Caribbean where, you know, leaders wanted to align very much with Britain and the West. And the fire which brought independence forwards - kind of - it wasn't put out completely, but I think people kind of looked away from it for a while.

PC Yes, I think that's fair.

PW So we've talked about - a lot about the historical subjects that you write. So, a lot of your plays are *The Whip*, *Upper Cut* - recent history. *Upper Cut* is recent history. What are the choices that you make as a writer when you take on the historical subjects? And you're very skillful at avoiding exposition, we know - we've talked about that a little bit before. Tell us how the research you do informs how you choose the characters and situations.

JGR For me, I think I always start with the history, and then the characters coalesce around that. You know, for me, historical fiction offers - it's an analysis of recognisable human character. So, I might choose historical people but dramatize and change them slightly to fit a particular historical narrative but very much grounded in the history so that no one can challenge me about the facts of which I'm writing, if you like. So, when I wrote *The Whip*, I knew that it was going to be a political piece. I knew that it was going to be actually very parliamentary because I was pulling apart what we didn't know about abolition, that we didn't know that slaves were to be coerced into unpaid apprenticeships. And the British government had to abandon that because emancipation was supposed to be emancipation. And also, how that was achieved. So, I was commissioned by the RSC - I think it was about 2016, actually. I had given them a treatment - they'd ask me to write a play for their studio space, The Other Place. I wrote a page treatment. And Pippa Hill, who's Literary Manager there, she read the treatment, and I don't forget her words, she said, "You and I both know that this is not going to fit into a studio. I'm commissioning this for The Swan." And what I loved about Pippa's response to that was that she understood the political challenge and the debate and the historical lived experience that I was trying to bring through, which was epic and therefore deserved the bigger stage, although the stories that I chose to kind of like unravel were very personal ones that, you know - and so I spent a lot of time in the House of Commons Library, which is a fantastic place. I recommend it to anybody. I was given Tomes' Hansard, which is the verbatim reportage of parliament and the debates held. So, I read those, from 1833 to 1834. I spent weeks. I

read the select committee report about abolition and whether this was a good idea or not. Would slaves know how to manage freedom, emancipation? Would they understand what money was or would they just be lazy? Slaves were compared to Scottish peasants. Who were the laziest? I mean I used the select committee report as the basis of a tavern scene where they're haggling over how much a man is worth and comparing these Negro slaves to Scottish peasants in the Caribbean. That blew me away. These are conversations that we do not have. And what fascinated me about that hearing and that I really discovered through the reading of Hansard and being in that library was that 1833 was an extraordinary time to be alive. Not only did you have the debate of - around abolition. You had to debate about children working in factories and for how long, the Factory Act. You had the Reform Act, and people forget that. Working men rioted in Bristol, and these Bristol spread around the country. People died, rioted for the right to vote, which, when I look at, you know, what happened to the Edward Colston statue in Bristol last year. It always seems to me that Bristol is very much at the centre of fomenting debate and history change because history's constantly in motion, and people would put on TV news and they were like, "Who are these fucks? Who are these people?" Not understanding that that whole debate around Colston and history and how it is - you know, it is to be viewed, had been going for decades. And the fact that we honour and remember those working men in Bristol who rioted for the right vote. So, I'm very keen to see how the story of black history, slavery, Edward Colston, how that morphs. And I'm looking forwards, and hopefully I'll be alive to see it, that it ends up in history books and on the school curriculum because what happened in Bristol between 1831 and 1833 you could read about in the history books. So going back to - looking at strands, and the other strand that I had to take out because the play was 30 pages too long was Catholic emancipation. So, the whole play is about British history. And I think that's why - I think, Pat, you'd said that even though I write very much from a black female point of view, it's not overwhelming because I'm also honouring and writing about the totality. So, for an audience, they were learning about the Emancipation Bill, how that was fought for. And they're learning about their own history, children in cotton mills. I've visited cotton mills. Children could be killed, you know, through the machine. Some children - there was a very distressing report of a child who'd been kicked to death because he'd fallen asleep at - you know, on the job. Not getting fed, stunted in growth, the toxins and the fumes. That the fight for - to be able to vote. The fact that women were agitated well before what we know as the suffragette movement. People were agitating - women were agitating for the right to vote, which I tried to also show in *The Whip*. So, yeah, I mean, you know, the research is important. The tent poles of those facts are really important. Once I have that, I then take my flight to fancy. Because I look at Hillary Mantel, and people, they respect her work. You know, no one questions Hillary Mantel and *Wolf Hall* and her depiction of Henry the 8th or Cromwell. And that's what I try to do with "The Whip". So, we have a politician who has been challenged to drive emancipation through parliament, through the interests of wealthy MPs, where there are - I mean working - had slightly become - had begun to come through. So, I have one character who is very populous as a working man. But in general, these were - they owned cotton mills and they owned plantations in the Caribbean. They became fantastically rich because of that bill. Gladstone made the equivalent of 80 million pounds, you know. They became fantastically rich. And then as a result of some kind of perverse reverse compensation, they then get the free labour of these slaves who were being coerced to work for these, you know, remunerated, compensated owners for free. This country borrowed 40% of its national GDP to - they borrowed that money to repay the slave owners. And then that loan was finished in 2015. Everybody working up until 2015, their hard-earned tax money went to pay off that loan. And, again, you won't read that in a history book. Children at school don't learn about that. I never learnt about that at school. So, yeah, I can feel - it kind of - it really gets me. I didn't

learn this at school. And now we have this nonsense about culture wars. And people, you know, fighting, you know, critical race theory in the States because they don't want this coming out. They don't want to learn it.

PC People make myths and then they believe in them because they're comfortable. I love Mercy and Horatia. I love the alliance between them. I thought that was a lovely piece of making the characters, but also creating the situation in such a way that you understood it emotionally as well as, you know, what the historical facts were. I'm going to ask you a nice, big, fat general question now because this is one - Pauline and I talk about this quite a lot. When did you first start to call yourself a playwright? And does it have a particular meaning? Are there responsibilities? Does it give status? It took me forever. I may have written five or six plays before I even thought of myself as a playwright. When did you decide that you were?

JGR It took me a long time. I'll be really honest. I didn't have the confidence and I didn't have that self-belief. So, I started writing. And I remember, you know, I wrote *At the Gates of Gaza* at Goldsmiths on my MA course, and people were saying, "This is really interesting. This is good stuff." But I didn't really understand that or feel that. I was being told, but what I now realise, it doesn't matter what people tell you. You have to believe it. Because if you don't, to be honest, you know, there is no point. You absolutely have to believe in yourself as a writer or go home. And I learnt that the hard way because I've had some knocks. And it was only when I decided that, "No, wait a minute. I am a playwright and I deserve to occupy this landscape." That's when I really understood what it was I was taking on and what my response - you're right to ask the question. You know, what my responsibilities are in terms of being a writer. But initially when I started writing, I was unable to use the phrase, "I'm a playwright". To me, playwrights were August Wilson, Tennessee Williams, you know, Shakespeare. It never occurred to me to announce myself or name myself in this kind of company.

PC Oh, you see. That to me is interesting. I don't know if that's a female thing or a black thing, but I've - so often, when we talk to writers, it's that hesitancy about, you know, stepping forward and taking the status. One of the things that - actually, when I was head of Talawa, that I heard and has always stuck with me, it was an American playwright called Lynn Nottage. And she said, "What we need to do with our storytelling is to be myth-makers because what we are up against is myths that other people have made. So, we need to make some myths of our own." One of - and, again, another reason that I'm so passionate about storytelling, whether it's, you know, on radio, through theatre, whatever, is that it educates, it heals, it reconciles. And I just wondered what you thought about, I suppose, your role in this process.

JGR I...

PC Are you a myth maker? That's the question.

JGR I think I am. You know, I understand that storytelling is very powerful. And, you know, it's interesting, if you look at the Oscar awards, for example, 10 years ago, 15 years ago, there were no black faces. And you look at the slate of stories being told now, whether it was HBO's *Watchmen* or the film *Moonlight*, there are so many more black stories coming through now. It's almost embarrassing to look back and to say that those - you know, those opportunities - well, we know that the opportunities weren't there, but we weren't really getting into those spaces where our myths could become mainstream. Because we talk to ourselves. We preach to the converted. But I think, as a myth maker, we have to be able to - and it's that thing that I think August Wilson was talking about, painting for Picasso's audience.

PC Yes.

JGR The stories that we tell, our myths, are for everyone. They're for everyone.

PC But this is the thing that I think about a lot now. There is a price that sometimes we pay for the stories that we tell. I remember reading *Beloved* and being completely entranced, but also feeling as though my guts had been torn out, you know. When I adapted it for radio, it took me two weeks after that to recover. And there is a price I think that we pay. I always say to writers, remember to look after yourself, to heal yourself, because what we - sometimes the stories that we tell - and we have to tell these stories, I think, at first - hurt. Yeah, hurt.

JGR I started watching *The Underground Railroad*. And I'll be honest, I've not been able to get past episode one. It was so distressing to me. I thought it was beautifully done. It's brilliant and I need to watch the rest of it. But it was so disturbing because our lived experience, that historical experience, and that's where you really feel the ancestral voices rushing in your head. It's real. People don't understand what we have risen from. We are like phoenix. We have risen through so much. And that lived experience and pain is very much within our cells and our DNA. So, I don't know whether you've seen this series, but, yeah, it was heavy. And I know that they had to really offer counselling to the actors to get through that.

PW I had a similar feeling when *12 Years a Slave* came out, and I thought, "I don't want to see that," because when I was growing up, we had *Roots*, and that was what we had as my generation. But I think it's important that those stories keep being told for new generations.

JGR It's interesting. My parents, at the time, they wouldn't let us watch *Roots*, and I think that's because we'd not long uprooted from East London, which was a very mixed community. We went to Suffolk because of my dad's job, and my parents felt that it would be too much of a burden for us as we were trying to get through our exams. And in a sense, they were looking after our mental health.

And eventually we did see it. What they did was that - they were brilliant. They always took us to the Commonwealth Institute, which was then open at the time. They told us about our history, but they wanted to do it. But, yeah, there is a price. There is a price. It's a price that we need to pay because, otherwise, you know, the generations coming through now, they won't learn that or they - you know, I'm writing a play at the moment for Synergy Theatre about Black Lives Matter and the criminal justice system. And I interviewed some young black men in particular who have been on the inside or who are at risk and was really taken aback when they were saying things to me like, "Black Lives Matter. What's that? You know, that means nothing to us. Where was BLM, you know, when we had no food to eat? Or when my parent was on drugs? Or when I ended up, you know, in front of a magistrate being given a sentence that my white mates didn't get?" And it stopped me in my tracks and - because we take this for granted. But what I've realised was that, and through talking to them, they had no context about their lived experience and the historical legacy of it. They don't know. So, for them every day is just about survival, so I get very frustrated about knife crime because we know what our ancestors survived in the Middle Passage, the disgusting circumstances that they suffered and those that survived it who were then sold on and worked to death. We know about that. And in a sense that gives me pride because I know that - that sounds cliché, but you know, we are the dreams of our ancestors who managed to fight their way through that. But for a lot these young kids, they don't know what it was like when *At the Gates of Gaza* opened at the Birmingham Rep. And, actually, they brought in school kids, and I spoke to a lot of the young black boys afterwards. They've never seen black men in uniform on stage. They don't know about that context. So, for us as writers, I think that umbilical cord between the past and the present is so important. And, again, going back to Lynn Nottage, that's why our myths, we have to keep them alive because - that's why they're healing. If our younger generation are divorced from that, I think it's very hard for them to find their feet, to know who they are, and to therefore respect themselves and others who look like them.

PW Yeah. That's wonderful. We're going to just change the mood a little bit here and talk about recognition and winning awards and what they mean to you. So, for *At the Gates of Gaza*, you won a Writers Guild Award. And last year, you won the Alfred Fagon Award for *The Whip*. What difference does that make to you and to your writing life?

JGR It's really interesting because if I'd not won any awards, my attitude would be, I'd probably fold my arms and just say, "Well, it doesn't matter. I do what I do. I think I'm a good writer. Why should winning an award matter at all?" And having won two awards, it actually meant a lot. So, there's a duality there. I am proud to have won those awards and to have won the recognition for those - for that work, but what I would also say is that, at the end of the day - because, like, you know, I would hate people to feel - young people, particularly, young black writers to feel that this is what they need to achieve in order for their work to be - for their work to be taken seriously or to be appreciated, that it's - awards are wonderful, but they aren't the be-all and end-all. I think for me the Alfred Fagon Award meant - really meant something because it was, you know, in recognition of an extraordinary black creative writer and actor who we've all come to respect. It's wonderful that his award is now - it occupies a space in our cultural landscape that I think, you know, has changed, thanks very much to you, Pauline. I had to get that in.

PC Yes.

JGR You know. But it's important because, you know, in years gone by, people didn't know who Alfred Fagon was, and the award didn't have that kind of spotlight and attention and oxygen. So, I think it's a wonderful way for our communities and, again, the mainstream to appreciate our work. Like the Writers Guild Award, I didn't expect to win it. The plays that were also nominated, they'd all opened in London. I was just glad to be there. So, in retrospect, yeah, it means a lot. But as I said, there's a duality about this. And, yeah, we write because we need to.

PC Okay. Here's another question. Most writers I know have at least two or three ways to earn a living because there always going to be lean times. So, I was curious to know how have you found a way to make a living as a playwright?

JGR That's such a good question. Oh, my goodness. So, I went from full-time employment to being self-employed. And I've never been really self-employed before I decided to leave the BBC. And I found a huge respect for self-employed creatives because then I realised just how tough it was. For me, it's, you know - I knew that I wanted to write and I needed that head space for creativity. And, you know, being in a newsroom, 24-hour news, and having the life of me sucked out by that process, it became untenable and I had to make a choice. And I knew that I would rather be a self-employed creative. But it was tough and I had underestimated how tough it would be. To be honest, I just assumed that I would quite easily find a job teaching, you know, supplement my earnings that way. And, actually, that didn't happen. And then I ended up freelancing for Sky News, which was an experience in itself. I learnt a lot from that process as well. But there came a point where I was able to leave and work as a full-time writer. But it was a roller coaster. And I guess my advice to writers, you know, those who have kind of like want to do this is that you do need a safety net, particularly in the early days. And that safety net, you know, it's fine. And it's like bricklaying. You've got to become a bricklayer, just one brick at a time, and recognise that for what it is. So that when you go to your creative space, that is a real joy. I think it takes a while - yeah. It takes a while to be able to step into that space where your writing is your - it's your life, it's your breath, and it's also your living. Because it carries a responsibility. It's about survival as well.

PW Because we like to end on a note of celebration, what are the best things about being Juliet Gilkes Romero?

JGR Wow. I... What I love about being me at this particular moment of time I think is... I think the freedom that I have to create those myths, to carry our stories, to really think about my heritage, how that impacts me today, and that I have... I've gained the confidence to know that this is exactly what I should be doing. And in answer to your last question, there is a quote that I think of a lot, and it's from Albert Camus, and it's "The purpose of a writer is to keep civilisation from destroying itself." And I think that this last year that we've endured and that we are surviving, and, you know, and

we're coming through, I think this is really real and true. And, you know, and I think that as writers we should be proud of our ability to create those myths and to heal our communities and to encourage young writers through to really carry the flame of what society and humanity needs.

PC And I'm going to counter that with one of my favourite quotations, which is from Ben Okri, and it says, "We are half human, half stories."

JGR Oh, I love that. Yes. Yes. I love that.

PC Well, Juliet Gilkes Romero, thank you very, very much for spending this time with us.

JGR And thank you for having me. I've enjoyed it. Thank you.

(Music plays)

The extract was directed by Leemore Marrett Jr. The actors were Solomon Israel, JD Marsh, Craig Stein and Sule Thelwell. Sound design by Matt Bainbridge.

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