



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Yomi Şode.

Patricia Cumper Yomi Şode is an award winning Nigerian British writer and performer. He is a recipient of the 2019 Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship and was shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize 2021. His acclaimed one man show, *Coat*, toured nationally to sold out audiences. His libretto *Remnants* premiered BBC Radio 3 in 2020 and in 2021, his play *And Breathe...* premiered at the Almeida Theatre to rave reviews. Last year, Yomi's debut collection, *Manorism*, was shortlisted for the 2022 T.S. Elliott Prize and the 2023 Rathbones Folio Prize and was a Guardian and Financial Times Book of the Year. Yomi Şode, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Yomi Şode How are you both? It's such a pleasure to be here. This is awesome.

Pauline Walker It's fantastic to have you.

YS Oh, my days. I am not going to lie, I was a bit like, oh, my God, I'm going to The Amplify Project. What's going on? What's this going to be about? Let's talk the things already.

PC Well, you see, what we do is we keep an eye out for things that are sparking off.

YS Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PC And we looked at you and thought hmm, we want to talk to this one. And I will also confess –

YS Go on.

PC – That I read *Manorism* to myself out loud and decided, yeah, yeah, yeah, this is very special. So, question number one, we usually ask writers when words and stories came into their lives, but with you, it kind of feels as if words, music, performance are all kind of interwoven. So, when did you become aware that you looked at the world through a creative lens?

YS So, I grew up with a lot of culture in the back end of my mind all the time. So, I grew up Nigerian, so, if that is the kind of nuances of culture and tradition and part of that, of course, is from a space where if you're younger, you should be aware of the amount of lip you give to the elders, right? You should just know, just know your place. And I remember a point when my auntie came to visit and my auntie was like, oh, she's staying for about two weeks. Now, I didn't know at the time like, if an elder is saying they're staying for about two weeks, that normally means about two years, but I'm just like, cool, so be it for two weeks it. So, little things started happening. My space just wasn't my space. I'll go into the front room and see that my auntie's there, just watching TV. I'm just like, but this is like, my space. And I think the last straw was my mum had cooked something and I was really excited, because I was like, I couldn't eat that evening, but the next day I was like, me and this dish is on. I go to the fridge, I open a fridge, boom, it's gone. I'm like where? And then I'm like, I know who done it. I know the culprit. And the thing is, as much as I'm cussing in my head. I'm like, there's no

way I could let it rip because I know the rules. So, I just wrote about it and took it to school, primary school at the time, drew a picture of my auntie, titled it, and I got a merit. And merit was like the highest thing you could get. And I was like, I got a merit for this. Even if I'm vexed, I got a merit for pretty much cussing out my aunt, but in the best way possible. This is nice. And then I went to another story, writing about a macaroni penguin. And then I drew a picture of this. And the idea of writing a story kind of just stuck with me and my teacher at the time, was like, you can really tell a good story. So, for me, that was the starting point of this. And then it naturally just grew as I got older, my interest into music grew also. And I wasn't really a reader, but I watched a lot of films, I listened to a lot of music. And that was my way of entering literature, was via the arts, but in a different way. So, when I got much older, I entered in music, so, I was listening to a lot of rap at a time. This was before Grime came into prominence, or UK based music came into prominence for me. And it was a lot of rappers, singers at a time. And then Grime came in. Then I learned how to DJ and produce music, which then got my link into music.

Then I started MCing thinking I could be one of these guys from So Solid Crew or something like that. So, my journey into literature was a lot of things, but going back to storytelling, going back to poetry was at a much later stage because I ventured into all these different things. First, performing on stage, having a band. At one point my session band was playing, so, I would finish rehearsing from my side. And Ed Sheeran was just coming in because at the time, he was also rehearsing with the same band. So, there was a lot of people that I came into contact with. And at the point when it got very serious was when I was booked at Wireless Festival in 2013, the biggest gig with the band. And we're like, oh my gosh, this is a Live Nation booking we'll make. This is it, the band. I was excited. It was exciting. And we done the gig, we done the set. It was amazing. And after that set, I decided to stop making music. And they looked at me and they were like, you have lost your mind. It's wireless festival. This is our biggest one. Why would you want to stop? And I knew why I wanted to stop. I wanted to stop because I felt like I was doing my craft a disservice. So, a week after I finished, I enrolled myself in a poetry course at City Lit, evening course, because I worked full time, so, I would finish work and for a year I would go to these evening courses, starting from scratch, again in relation to poetry, learning all about it from scratch, you know them entry points for poetry and whatever it is. And I would start literally from scratch and learn about all these different crafts, all of these different techniques, because I felt like I was doing the craft of writing a disservice. I could write a song, but in writing a song, it's very structured. Verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, see you later. But it can also dumb down a lot of the stuff that you really want to write about because it's very formulaic. And that's why I thought I was doing my craft as a writer a disservice because I wasn't given enough space to really venture into what I wanted to write about. So, these courses really helped. And then from that point, I started writing *Coat*, which is my first solo show from there. So, my journey has been, as you said, it's been all these different things. But I'm grateful for those entry points because I don't know where I would have been without it.

PW Absolutely. So, when did you first call yourself a poet?

YS It took me a while. And just going off the back of the last question, because I've had so many different entry points, it's very hard to just say, I'm just this one thing. And I say this with no ego or anything else like that. I just say because there's so many things, I'm so curious to explore in literature, that for me to just be, I'm just a poet, is, I feel like I'm boxing myself in to a certain degree, but I absolutely own every part of me that enters into poetry. And it wasn't something I claimed for myself, so to speak, until one evening I had this show in Brixton no, sorry, I had a show in in Herne

Hill. And of that time, there were the kind of senior poets of David J, Aminoair. There were these greats that I looked up to at the time and I had a set alongside them as well. And I'm like, boy, you know when you sweating and it's like, these dons they've been in this for a minute and then you're this young buck, you're coming into it. So, it's a point to prove at that moment. And I get these moments from time to time. And I went on and I'd done this set and I'll never forget all of them. They were like poet, poet. Look at him. Do your thing, poet. And I was just like, whoa, they're calling me that. So, if they're calling me that, that's like a validation that I'm not wasting time on this stage. And I took it on board. And it's something subconsciously that I call myself. But I always feel like I'm consistently learning, even though I'm published now, even though this book is out there, it's still a process for me that I feel like I'm working towards. I am here. I'm working towards what this fully means to a point of realisation. So, I hope that kind of answers it.

PW Yeah. I just want to ask you about Malika's Poetry Kitchen and what part that played for you in helping you to become the poet that you wanted to be, really?

YS I had a conversation with Malika, actually, the weekend gone, and I said, I don't know if you remember this, like, I called Malika one time and I said, the Kitchen is doing what it's doing. I'm really thankful and I'm really, really interested in focusing on this writing now because I'm taking it so, so serious and in a roundabout way. Would you mind being my official/unofficial mentor type of thing, right. If you know Malika, you know, how Malika's got her bangles and she's got the jewellery, everything. And I could just hear that in the silence, in the pause, you know, there's like tension being built. I'm like, why you got to make this dramatic? What's going on out here? So, I can just hear the kind of clanging of the jewellery and everything. And I don't know what's about to happen. She's like, "it took you long enough. I've been waiting for a year for you to call me, to talk to me about this." And I was like, whoa, this is awesome. And there was something there about, how you again, just don't wait if there's something that there's an urgency or if you feel people have been seeing your journey with you not necessarily realising it, right. And Kitchen has really helped in being part of a community. The writers that have come out of Kitchen that's still frequent, that might visit Kitchen from time to time, it's incredible. And it feels good to be part of a community or collective of writers. It's the only collective of writers that I've been a part of that and then came the complete works as well. So, those two collectives have done so much in how much I've learned as a writer and also in knowing that there's a shared experience between other peer groups as well. So, I'm really thankful for that.

PC You call yourself a Nigerian British writer?

YS Yeah.

PC That's a very specific order.

YS Mad specific. Mad specific.

PC What does that dual identification mean to you and what does it mean to your art?

YS I wasn't born in England. I was born in Nigeria. I arrived in England around nine. My mum would tell me that I was younger but I feel like it was around nine. And I hardly spoke English. It was snowing. I didn't know what snow was. I'm thinking, I'm going to die. I don't know what's going on. It was cold. It was all these different things. And then in comes, these experiences of trying to make friends, and then in comes these experiences of assimilating your mother tongue to adapt around

the landscape around you. And then you have to survive through all of that. And even now, as an adult, as a father, there's that whole process of Britishness and how you explain that and how you talk and how you raise children with that in mind. So, there's something in that duality in terms of, yes, I'm very much here, but at the same time there are parts of me that culturally holds so much weight that can't be disregarded. And also, there's a politic of, at one point, I felt like I could not write about these experiences. I felt like I couldn't explore these experiences in my writing because I don't know what the canon, from what I know of the canon, it's just these dead white men. I'm just like, cool. Now, do I need to write in relation to these dead white men to be, you know, to be accepted? And I remember a Jackie Kay poem, *Egusi* and she was talking about these cultural references and this meeting with her father and everything. I'm like, oh, my God, I know this. This is what I eat as a traditional dish. Like, and you're Jackie Kay and this is possible. And you can do these things in speaking in Yoruba, for example, or putting Yoruba on the page. I would italicise it but at one point I was like, why am I italicising a language that I knew first before English? So now, I'm making that as straight as possible because my language is not other. It was priority before English for me, so, why should it be looked upon as other on the page? So, these things I had to learn over time. So, that kind of duality comes with a politic, comes with an experience and hopefully shared experience, that I'm not alone in this situation, that other people can, that it can inspire others for the most part, to be like, all right, cool. This just takes challenging, but what it shouldn't do is make you feel like you need to erase a part of yourself.

PC You see, what is really interesting to me is I think there's a lens in your writing where the people you look at are all granted equality. Caravaggio, Grime artists, same thing. And I love that. And I wondered if that was connected to it. Are you seen in the UK as a Black writer and in Nigeria as a writer? Is there a difference in how you're perceived?

YS Do you know what it is? It's interesting that at one point, when I was so (laughs) this is - just talking on duality. When I went back to Nigeria for a festival, a literature festival, I was so excited because it's been so long. And I went back there, so, I'm in my traditional clothes, I didn't want to wear no tracksuit, nothing like that. I'm home for the most part. I'm here. And it's interesting because when that was me, there, a lot of the folks within the community were just like, why are you wearing your trad stuff? Like, where's the Nike stuff? Where's the Adidas stuff? Where are your tracksuits? And I'm like, but that's all whatever I was wearing in London, like, I'm here, I want to feel the soil. Like, I miss here. And folks are like, why but why are you dressing like this? I'm like what you mean, why am I dressing like this? What do you mean? What's the confusion right now? And then it was just like that whole thing of, oh, yeah, but you're British anyway. And I'm like, you can't say I'm British in Nigeria. This is just confusing now, because when I get to Britain, all they're going to tell me, you're just black and Nigerian and this is not your country. And now that I'm in my country, you're now telling me that I'm not in my country. I'm like, give me a break. I'm like this weird in between. And in the case of what duality meant for me at that time, this was it. And I think that is very important for me in terms of just trying to find that fine line between, say, Caravaggio and Grime. It was very important to me in terms of how to look at this cross board if we're talking. Thank you for raising that. Because I'm like, yes, in one sense, these two things, they seem so opposite, but at the same time, there are stories here that align it, which I'm sure we'll get into in a bit, but it's always a constant journey, I suppose, is what I'm trying to say. In terms of just like trying to find a middle ground. Because when I was told this in Nigeria, I'm just like, what do I do? Because I'm told this in England. So, I now have to find my own peace between these spaces, as opposed to trying to lean on whatever place for some form of validation. I have to be very present within myself

as opposed to relying on these different things, because I might get let down and then I have to question myself and be like, what happens if I get let down? What was I expecting in the first place that I need to interrogate within myself and make peace with, in order to go forward.

PC You see, that for me, is about the writer taking up that space out of the liminal space, where you're neither sea nor shore, you are where the tide washes. But it's also, as anthropology will tell you, the space where magic comes from. So, that liminality is a powerful thing.

YS It has to be. It's powerful, but it can be lonely as well.

PC Oh, yeah.

YS You see what I mean? Like, it can be so lonely. I think about the process of writing a book. I think about the process of finding self. And I would love to go through it and discuss it with friends. I would love to discuss it with all these different people. I would love to not feel so alone. How can you feel so alone in writing something so beautiful? It's mad. You should be able to share that with people. You should be able to share that and talk about it, in which it does happen once people have read a book or heard the poem and they want to talk to you about it. But I think what's not often discussed is how lonely a process it is in that liminal space when you're going through something. Like it's, and, you know, people need therapy and they do this, and I'm just like, all right, I get it. But at some point, you still have to be in alone in your space, hearing the hum of the fridge, creatives know the hum, that fridge hum is a very lonely space. And now, we've been considering what that does for our own mental health once we've written the play, written the book, and now we have to go through this process again a year, two years later. It's a lot.

PW It's a lot. Let's talk about *Manorism*.

YS Let's go there. Let's go there. Let's go, go, go. Yeah, I'm flying around playing. I'm playing.

PW So, it's your first poetry collection. It's been described as a wonder of a collection. Thrilling, remarkable, textured, searing, shimmering, brilliant. How did the collection come together? Tell us about the themes.

YS I was on the way back from a show, and I was really interested in behavioural traits. I've been interested in behavioural traits for a while. 2015, me and two friends went away to Brighton for the weekend. It was Good Friday, and it was in lead up to, like, Easter, what have you. And my friend had pretty much, like a nervous breakdown, and me and my boy were just like, all right, cool, we're going to go away for three days just to make space. I'll never forget because the Kendrick album came out, the second Kendrick album. And we were waiting for the drop to happen. It happened on Good Friday. So, we got to Brighton on a Thursday, and we were all waiting for this album to come out. And we went out the whole of that Thursday evening in a restaurant, and we spoke about it. A real, real kind of like black men just out, just talking 05:00 a.m., the album came out, and by 07:30, we had it loaded on our sound bar. And I'll never forget the first thing in the morning, we're all in our beds, separate beds, and we're listening to this album, just play the whole album. And then once we got ready and then we went out, I said, you know, I think I might call my book Mannerism because of there's just something innate in this gathering that only we know as black men in a space like a DNA that we grew up with. So, fast forward, I'm now researching Mannerism and behaviour traits. And all I kept on seeing was these art figures. I'm like, what is this I'm coming across art stuff? Why? What's happening? Only to find out that the term Mannerism was coined in Italy. And

next to that, there were these Mannerist artists. And the job of the Mannerist artists were to jar the status quo of that time. So, if you had a really fine painting of Jesus, a baby Jesus of that high renaissance time, the Mannerist artist's job, sole purpose, was to jar that painting so, they might elongate baby Jesus's nose, finger, toenail, ear, wherever they would jar it. There were used palettes, colour palettes that just wasn't used at that time. And I thought it was around the 1600, and I felt like it was really interesting how criticisms of the Mannerist artists and painters, they were saying, what they do into these figures is odd, it's off. But I found it really interesting also that at the time, enslaved Africans and the way they were looking at black bodies, big bottoms, broad noses. They're also described as odd and I saw a parallel between that. But I also saw a parallel between Mannerist artists and the punk era and the Grime era because they were non-conformists. So, I felt like, oh, I've got something to work with here. Because my thing of Manorism speaks to the area in which you grow up in, the DNA and the coding that you grew up with, but also, the non-conforming and the driving of that system. So, that I felt like that was the way forward. And then Caravaggio gets brought in my direction, and I was like, who is this guy? And I was like, this guy is very interesting because on face front, his work is beautiful, his work is revered, but his life is so chaotic. But he got away with so much at the same time. But he also is a non-conformist. He also is for the people and doesn't necessarily cater for the higher up, even though he seeks the respects of the higher up. And I really wanted to interrogate that a bit further, but not make the whole book about that because I don't want to explore things like racism through a white lens. That wasn't my sole purpose of this. But I wanted to juxtapose, if this guy can do this and get away with it, I can't be afforded that similar grace? And we've seen multiple instances where other black men are not afforded that grace. Why is that? And that, for me, was some of the boiling points for the book. But most importantly, underneath all of that, I wanted to explore the vulnerabilities of black men as a whole. Hence the third section of this book. All of those things was important, even down to the cover of the book, because people might not understand why the cover of the book is the way it is. And just to clarify, that is, more time the black male body is fetishised a lot, but what you don't see is what's behind that red, big red dot in front of that face. Because if you remove that big red dot on that face and you see the vulnerability in that man's face, you are now responsible for how you respond to that face. And likelihood is, you don't want to ask what's wrong or what's going on? Hence why you'd rather cover that face and just look at the body, because you don't want to actually know, you don't want to know what's wrong with this man. You don't want to ask it, because if you ask it, you don't even know how to approach this man for the most part. So, there's a lot to kind of unpick in relation to this book, even from the cover of the book. So, I hope all of that makes some sense.

PW It's amazing. Before we get to a reading, I just want to ask about how did you get *Manorism* published? Because it's very in your face. It's very visceral. I think it's amazing piece of work. But how did you, what was the route to getting it published?

YS Me and my agent, we worked for a while, me and Suresh [Ariaratnam] worked for a while in getting it ready prior to the manuscript even being submitted. I had worked for two years prior to that with Mimi Khalvati, with Pascale Petit, and with Bill Herbert, I call them my trinity. And I've worked Bill with the longest time, I've worked with Bill, with Mimi, and with Pascal. You know, I worked with them separately, and I spent a lot of my own money, for the most part in wanting it to be as right as it could be. And then when we got to a point that I felt, yes, confident with it, I spoke with my agent, and he submitted it, and it went out to numerous editors. And what was really interesting was the feedback, because none of them said that it was not good. A lot of them said

that it was good, like, really good. But there's always a but, and I always questioned the but. It was always a question of the but. Some might say that it's too narrative, but then I know they've published writers who dealt with narrative a lot. I wouldn't necessarily say it was excuses being made, but I think what this book does is, what it asks for, is for you to champion it in such a way that there's an accountability that comes with this, that puts you in a point of responsibility as a publisher. It's like, now you're putting this [out] you're going to champion this, but with championing this, your readership might not be used to it. So, now you have to back this in terms of that. And I don't know how many were willing to back it. And it's really interesting as well, because if we're talking about craft, it's got sonnets in there, it's got your ghazal, it's got all of these things that you normally, you might be like, oh, it doesn't necessarily work craft wise. It's got all the things in which he's asking for. We've got story, so, why wouldn't you? And that's the thing, do you see what I mean? So, that was always a really interesting one for me that I don't think I'll ever get an answer to. But I do hope it shifts and it changes, because how else are we going to challenge and how else are we going to meet change if we're not prepared to challenge what's uncomfortable, to look into what might be uncomfortable? And it's not wholeheartedly an uncomfortable book, but there are things that it's asking for of individuals that I don't know if they are necessarily as geared to deal with as yet. And I hope that does change as we move forward. But when the publisher did pick it up, they were like, oh, let's go for it. And I was like, oh, oh, cool. Let's actually go. And it was, yeah, the rest is kind of history from that point.

PW And what have readers said about it?

YS Readers, readers. I have not received any negatives in relation to it, you know, which is a beautiful thing, even on Goodreads, for example, which is almost like you're being told, don't ever go on Goodreads because you might just cry if you go on Goodreads, don't ever go at it. And maybe I like a bit of trouble, I don't know. And I went on Goodreads and I saw this guy, he gave a five-star review. Thank you, cool. But he was a bit frustrated because, what was being asked of him was to go on to Google and translate a lot of the Yoruba. So, his thing was really, really loved the book but I was so annoyed. No, he didn't say so annoyed, but it was tad frustrating that, I just had to do a lot of work in translating blah, blah, blah, blah. And the idea that he couldn't sense the irony of what he was writing because, guess how much work I've had to do in this country just to assimilate and just to adapt. Guess how much work I've had to do only to be shown in my face that, no, it's not good enough. And now you're complaining because you have to do a piece of work. Good. Good. Absolutely do the work. Hence why some Yoruba in this book is not translated. Some are, but some is not translated because there's an audience out there that it will absolutely speak to, that understand, they will feel seen. Hence why it starts the way it starts. Because I felt like I had to learn English straight away and forget about my culture. So, that's the start of the book is a reclaiming of a lot of things over time to people that feel that they're not seen. Because there was an 11-year-old girl that came up to me and said, "I can't wait to show this to my mum. I can't wait to show this to my mom. She's Yoruba as well and Nigerian. I'm Nigerian" and I'm like that's it, that is absolutely it like when you get something like that, I'm all here for the prizes, thank you for the shortlist and everything like that. But you see that, that is beautiful to me and I think that for me is dope that the response is when I get a bunch of kids in the top row of a show, like young adults wearing hoodies and everything and I read some of the poems and I'm like, oh, my God, they're going to heckle. But then out of nowhere they're championing it. They come to me afterwards saying, I like you, you know, I like you, you know. I'm like, cool. I get some of the adults coming up to me saying I'm a father. I get some other people saying that you know what, I feel seen, I'm going

through the process of grief. That's what this book is meant to do. Hence why in the endorsements I was very adamant with the team that I just don't want poets to endorse this book. I want dancers to endorse this book. I want actors. I want radio presenters. I want people that you probably you've never heard of, but they have their own community of people because it's those people that kind of matter to me.

PW Let's hear some poetry now.

YS Àdùrà Màmá Mi. Oh, I'm just to preface this as well, this was a bit of an intergenerational thing, so, me and my mum, like she wrote this, spoke to her about it, so, it was like a really it was like a proper process of her, myself and I working through this. [YS reads the poem]

PW That's beautiful.

YS Thank you.

PW It's very nice. Shall we have another one as well?

PC Can I have, *Manorism 2* Thanos Theory?

YS Sure thing. [YS reads the poem]

PC Amazing. That one just resonated with me when I read it. I have a son and grandsons. It absolutely sat with me.

YS Thank you.

PC There is, in a lot of the rest of your work, a great sense of the malleability of language. That one was very direct. The prayer at the beginning was quite subtle. Talk to me about how you see language? Do you see it as malleable? How do you work within form and structure?

YS Check you out Pat. So, one of the other titles for this book was that she going to be malleable.

PC Good.

YS Check you out. The malleability of Language. It was that, it's just that. It's the ability to have all of these different languages. There's English, there's Yoruba, there's colloquial terms, but there's also a language in *Manorism* that we just kind of understand. I was listening to a podcast the other day. It was a quiz for the team and the team was predominantly black. And I'm like, there's going to be a sentence, there's going to be a list of different things I'm going to say and you just have to respond to what it is. So, one of them were like, musical terms, but one thing that he said was, you see a bunch of black people running towards you, what do you do? And everyone was just like, instantly no, you see a bunch of black people running past you, what do you do? And everyone's like, immediately run. That is a language. It's almost like you just see this happening. Our mannerisms, our intent thing was just like, oh, danger. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Go. So, for me, it's the ability to look at language in a way that details it as opposed that, you know, it's classic show, don't tell type of thing. There needs to be a way for me to actually accurately talk about or explore language in a way that you just know innately, this is what it means. That you just went through that Pat when you heard the poem. There's a language there that you're just like, I know where that is taking me, and I am absolutely for this. And I think one of my main aims or what I'm trying to do in the writing, in my writing, is explore a language where people just feel held in such a way without

writing specifically for people. Like, how am I able to write my own experiences and my thoughts with a language that ultimately speaks and communicates with people? And it's a fun, sometimes really heartbreaking thing to look into, but it's doable. And it's doable because I keep pushing myself every single time to find the best way to do this.

PC So, is this because you see yourself as a storyteller? And I'll tell you why.

YS Go on.

PC The name storyteller is so powerful. You've moved between poetry and playwriting. I'm sure you've written songs, you've said, you've even explored dance, all of them, you're telling a story. Your first play was it was called *Coat*, a one-man show, which included cooking, which fascinated us. How do you do that? What does storyteller mean to you? And maybe also the idea of a griot or a storyteller. What is the importance of telling stories?

YS I think about all the different ways how I've got to have understood story over time. So, Jill Scott is one of my favourite artists. And in her first album, *Who is Jill Scott?* There is this moment where in a supermarket, she goes to the cashier or to the person at the till, and there's an exchange where she sniffs, and she smells the scent, and she says a man's name. And then the lady's like, right. And I'm like, we just sensed some form of adultery just happened here. But it was in the simplest way by just sniffing, saying the guy's name, and both of them meeting in the middle to be like, there's a connection. And I'm like, I want to do that. How can I do what Jill just done? That is incredible to me in terms of telling a story in such a way like that. And then I get busy in terms of how to do this. So, my constant search of trying to find ways to tell a story is that, I wouldn't necessarily...I don't know if it's a griot. I feel like I just want to tell stories in such a way that you can see it playing out. You're actively there. You're in there with that point in time. And that, for me, is something that's really, really important. And recently, I've been moving into dance because I'm like, all right, cool, is one thing to write this story and to be read, but how can you see a story in the body? And that is, I am not going to lie. I am not got enough...There's only so much moves I can make because the next day my bones feel it. I am not going to lie to you, so. But the ability, because I'm not a dancer, but I believe in the story. And I think if there's one thing with me, is that I'm willing to push myself so much in order to get this story out so, it will look the way it looks because it takes practice. So, I will meet with Jonzi and I will speak with Jonzi, who I've been working with for, like, the last 10 years.

PW Jonzi D?

YS Jonzi D and Jonzi sees story in me. And Jonzi will tell me that I can see you, I can see dance in you even before, because he hears the way I write this story, and he's able to push my body to a point where he now introduces me to different people. And now, this is another entry point in terms of how I tell this story. So, for me, I'm always looking for new ways and sharpening established ways of story and what that looks like. And I love that. I love the idea of finding new ways to write a story, you know.

PC And the older I get, the more I realise that the way we build bridges between peoples, between your life experience and mine is by the stories you tell me and the stories I tell you.

YS 100%.

PC Coded or plain or whatever it is. So, yeah, the older I get, the more I believe that storytellers are absolutely vital. I really, really believe that. Okay, your one man play, *And Breathe...* at the Almeida was based on the third section of Manorsism, who decided to make it into a stage play? How did that whole process come about?

YS My theatre agent calls me, and she pretty much just said, oh, so Almeida have a window open, and they're not doing anything with that window. David Johnson is free around that time, and she sent the manuscript to them, but she sent it with the attention of them reading the third section because she feels like the third section can be a play. And I'm like, oh, I didn't know you was doing that. Oh, cheers for doing that. She said, oh, anytime and by the way, they want to put it on. I said yo, what? She's like, yeah, they want to put it on. I said, how long do I have? How long do we have? She said, five weeks. I'm like, five weeks? What do you mean? I need to kind of book time off of, like, what? What? And she was like, we kind of need an answer from you to go ahead. I said, how soon? She said, in the next day or so. I said, this is something else. And we worked on this for five solid weeks, and it opened for about, I think, five or six weeks or what have you, and just the response was incredible. The response was something else. I was a bit mindful because I wanted to represent a community that felt welcomed in spaces. I'm very mindful of what that looks like. So, even before anything, myself, David, and Miranda sat in the Almeida. And one of the first things that we asked was, what do we want to do with the time that we're here? And there was a lot of things that we agreed to, was to speak to the entire team and say, this is exactly what we'd like, and this is why this is important. And for the time that we're here, these are the groups that we would like to target and work with. I would like to have poetry nights as part of this, open nights as part of this. And it was beautiful. There were people that lived across the road for years from the Almeida that never attended, and they came in and they were like, we just didn't know this place does this. And for us, for that time, it was incredible. For David, it was incredible. For Miranda, Femi, the whole team. And for me, as a writer, this is the first time I've had to actually not be part of something. So, it was really strange. If we're talking control freak, it was really strange to just sit back and just allow it to happen in terms of the rehearsal. I'd say to Miranda, oh, do you need me, Miranda? No, we don't need you, I'm like cool, I'll call, I'll see you later. And then come the previews, it was really interesting to just sit and watch how people would respond. People sat there crying, and I'm checking to see if they're all right. And that impact, I didn't understand. I guess I did, the power of words and the power of work and what it can do, but until I felt that and see people still sitting there 20 minutes after the play, like, crying, crying. I didn't know. I felt guilty at some point. I'm like, I didn't want to cause so much. And they're laughing, crying. My close friend, whose wife recently experienced a loss, he called me. He's like, I got a beef with you. I'm like, what did I do? He's like, you made my wife cry. She just kept on crying. She didn't stop. Now, I have to now fix that situation. I'm like, I'm so sorry, bro, I'm so sorry.

PC But don't you think it's important that people understand –

YS It is.

PC – grief and that what you give is a space in which you can do it, and the story has given them a way in. And I think that, that's tremendously important

YS Because I had to go through that even in the audiobook, what people don't know is so, in the audiobook, before we went to rehearsal with *And Breathe...* I had a sit down with my cousin Ade, who is prevalent in the third section. And it was the anniversary of Big Mummy. And when we went back to my mum's, I said, I've got the sequence, and I would like to read it to you. And I recorded this process. So, I recorded the entire...it was like an hour, every poem I read through. And then we spoke about that point in time afterwards and on the audiobook of *Manorism*, it has bonus content of that discussion in the audiobook, where we're talking about some of these poems and how he felt, how I felt, all of these different things. And we needed to do that because none of the family members were talking about this process of grief at all in that time. And I guess that's some of the things I just didn't necessarily expect but I was thankful. And then we got the Black British Theatre Awards, and it won like, four prizes, like, *four awards*. And we just see like, you know, we done a good job. We've done a really, really, really, really, really good job. And all the while, the book hadn't come out yet. People are like, oh, where do we read the text? I'm like, yeah, it's not out yet. But it's out a whole year later. And people are like, but how? And then again, that shows me the kind of boundaries that can be broken. Just because something isn't out yet doesn't mean the work from it can't be moved into these different spaces and do these things, you know.

PW That's what I love about it, actually. So, having got the acclaim and the recognition from the Black British Theatre Awards, how did that make you feel?

YS There was some pressure, in a sense. But then at the same time, I wasn't as worried because there were other bits I was working on. And I don't even mean to make that sound in any egotistical way. I was still very solely focused on this book. I was thankful that I was acknowledged in that sense, that David and Miranda and Femi were acknowledged. And for all of us, we were just like, we have work to do. I do joke. I'm like, listen, if this is the only book I ever write, what's come out of this book, I'm very thankful for. I've got an idea for the next collection already and I'm very confident in knowing nothing of *Manorism* in terms of the themes for *Manorism*, is going to bleed into this next book. Everything I needed to write about this book, about the themes is in this book. And I'm thankful for that because it means that I feel like there's no residue that I need to carry on. There will be a carry on from it, but it will be worth something completely different. So, with that, I think there is an acknowledgment that it done this, and it's the idea of just moving forward post that point. But I'm very thankful that it's been received so well in that sense.

PW Can we ask you to read a little bit from the third section of *Manorism*?

YS 100%. 100%.

PW Thank you.

YS So, it's the decision of what to pick from this third section.

PC It's tough that's why we didn't do it.

YS It's very tough.

PC We left it to you.

YS And I'm going to read 'Confessions of a Penitent' because I remember at the time, this is a time in which as a family, we found out about big mummy's cancer and my mum works night shifts and she would finish at 8:00 a.m., and head straight to big mummy to treat her. But what that meant was she's hardly slept. So, I'm now getting really worried because my mum is tired and weak and I'm worried for her health. By the same time, how can I now speak to my cousin whose mum is dying? To say, I'm worried about my mum. It almost felt so selfish to just be like, I need to look after my mum when I know you're currently going through a process of your mum is dying. And these are those kind of visceral emotions that in grief you don't really want to talk about, but it's stuff you process all the time. And then something else about masculinity and everything's earthing out of this. But it was a really hard poem to write, and it was a really hard poem to share with him at the time as well. 'Confessions Of a Penitent' [YS reads the poem].

PC Very moving. But again, what I like so much about it is the ordinariness of it finding the extraordinary in the ordinary, which I think is, well, I love to do that. And I really enjoy it in other people's writing.

YS Yeah. Thank you.

PW Let's talk about the work you do as a mentor and running master classes and events to promote writers of colour.

YS Oh, let's talk about that. Do you know, the thing is, mentor is a term I struggle with sometimes, because it almost has this kind of cloak thing going on.

And I think for me, that's why I said earlier with Malaika being an official/unofficial mentor. Because the thing is, Malaika will never say, she's, my mentor. Roger Robinson will never say he is, Nick, Jonzi, they will never say these things. They'll just check in to be like, oh, what's going on? How you doing today? What's happening? What you're working on? Natalie Teitler very important because Natalie Teitler, pretty much from the inception of this idea, Natalie Tyler was calling me every week, how are we doing? What's happening? What you're working on?

I'm glad that you say dance now and not movement, because I was always using movement to kind of shirk the whole, I'm a dancer type thing. She's like, I'm glad you've affirmed it, and this is what it is. But they will never say categorically that they mentor me. And I think there's something in me just working with writers and emerging writers, just to see how they're doing. So, in 2021, I realised that I had a year to work on this book before the publication. So, it was announced March 2021 that a book was going to come out May 2022. I'm like, all right, cool. So, I have all this time to edit. I'm not going anywhere. I'm in the house. We're still going through this weird post pandemic situation. So, I said, what can I do? So, I said, oh, with this time I have, it would be good to just work with a range of different writers or what have you, because, like I said, it's lonely. Editing is very lonely, and what better way to make up that time than to work with other people and share a community while I'm editing. So, I decided to do what I call 12 and 12. So, I work with twelve writers for 12 months, leading to the publication of the book. Cool. And I refused to apply for Arts Council funding because I was just like, if all of these organisations, if they say that, if they pledge that they want to support emergent writers, put your money where your mouth is and let's see what happens. So, I just done a cold call to like, 10 organisations and said, hi, I'm blah, blah, blah, blah, working towards this. I'm looking to really support X amount of different writers. Would you mind sponsoring the writers for 12 months? And I can send you reports in terms of how they're doing. And it'll be a mix of me

working one-to-one with them for an hour and master classes. So, one month, one month this, one month that, blah, blah, blah. And of the ten, 7 organisations came back, and they sponsored 7 of the writers for the year. And again, it just shows me what's doable. And now, for the most part, if I want to do this again, I can apply for Arts Council funding. But I showed them that this is, look at what we've done with this first round. And that was a beautiful year. And just work with the writers and hosting poetry nights, curating events. It speaks to a lot of the work I do outside of poetry and the art. It's community based, where, I'm not the priority. I've met with numerous publishers and they're like, oh, so, what do you want to talk about what you working with? And I'm just like, it's not about me. I have this really cool idea to engage all these different writers and I'm just wondering, as a publisher, would you support that? And they're thrown because it's the whole thing of like, but you're not talking about yourself. And I'm like, because I've already got this book, that's cool, but if this book is like a nice way to start a conversation about this, then it's absolutely what I want to do. And that we can talk about me another time, but for now, there's something here that I want to work with because my entry into here was a lot of gatekeeping and it took me time to try to find my way around because it's the spoken word, poetry, performance poet, spoken word poetry. I've gone to writing retreats where people are of course, you're going to learn that quick because you're a spoken word artist, but I'm like, but what does that take from this? When are you going to take me seriously? When are you going to not see me as this? When am I not now going to be considered as this? I know specific writers that don't necessarily, that term is something that no one necessarily subscribes to anymore, even though they've kind of grown through it, they don't assign themselves to it because it feels like it feels a bit judgy. Hence why my acknowledgments, the first thing I kicked off with my acknowledgments is, thank you to the open, my circuit and spoken word community because that's where I started, and it's never left me. So, I think a lot of that works within the community ethos in which I work with. I think it just carries on, I suppose it doesn't slow down.

PC And there is something, I have to admit, of being in the company of writers and talking with writers allows you to begin to talk at 10 rather than having to go from 1, you know what I mean? Okay, practical question.

YS Go on.

PC We know it's tough for creatives, I mean, particularly now. How does a poet, a playwright, a dancer, how do you make a living?

YS Workshops. The pandemic was really tough, and it was tough because a lot of work slowed down. I know definitely there was a week where email after email after email started coming through, in that one week where it was like, cancellations, cancellations, cancellations. And I sat back and I was like, whoa, what now? There's still rent, there's still food, all of these things to consider. But I wasn't phased in that sense. It just needed a bit of realigning. And the reason why on my side, it needed a bit of realigning was I'm still 11, 12 years old, going with my mum to Greenwich Market, buying the latest films, coming out in the cinema, in the VHS, going home, having a scart lead, two VHS is dubbing it, reselling it. I'm still the one that go over to the cash and carry's, and she will attest to it, I'll go to the cash and carry or buy my like Kit Kat for like 20p or something like that, a bag, and then I'm selling it at 40p. There's a hustler in me that I can't negate. There's a natural, Nigerian hustle mentality that has always worked with me. And I guess that's the thing when we're talking about erasure, is when these things matter, you don't need to erase all that side. Even though you've moved to London or you're wherever it is now, you still have to tap into

your back a day mentality of how you worked to survive in order to really push forward. So, I just got on the emails, 12 and 12, would you mind? Blah, blah, blah. It's a cold call, but it's a confident cold call to know what you believe in, in yourself. So, a lot of that time was, all right, cool, just go back to when you were 11 and go back to when you were 13. Because, you know, with nothing to other writers and other creatives, they have worked solely off the back of waiting for organisations to offer them commissions, offer them this, offer them that. So, come the point of a pandemic and no one was there. No organisations are sending the email to do this. You almost forget that you still have your entire self in order to know how to survive this thing. Hence why I had to do it without Arts Council. Because I'm like, if I don't have Arts Council, how will I still ensure funding for myself and funding for the people that want to be part of this process? I'm not doing it just for the sake of it. I'm doing it because if something like this happens again in the future, I need to know how to survive as well as still being able to write. So, for me, getting on the emails to provide ideas about, oh, I think you should do this. Can we talk about this? Have you considered this? The worst I can get, Pauline is a no. The worst I can get, Pat, is like, not right now, maybe another time. But at least we know that I can still carry on that conversation. So, for me to answer that, it's just being as daring as possible in the most polite and nice way. I don't want to be bullish in that approach. I think there are different ways in which we can definitely have a conversation if it's feasible. I don't want to pluck something out of thin air if you can't do it. If I can see these worlds meeting, I'll definitely think it's up for a conversation.

PC I completely understand coming here into an arts environment where it's actually funded, my goodness, you know. Coming from where I was starting, comedy clubs with people, I was getting major commissions to do radio series. And you're absolutely right. You bring that with you. You put it in the corner, and when you need it –

YS You just bring out. I called it Bob the Builder tool belt, you know, Bob the Builder got his tool belt. You just open one, tuck it in, close it. It's a simple thing for, like, forms, like three-act structure, which is mad, because even in playwrighting, in a three-act structure, I apply it to *Manorism*. How are we going to work through this? What's our inciting incident? Where we're going to go with conflict? Is there a resolution? How am I able to do it in not only one poem, but a whole book? And it's like I'm just opening that pocket. Bring out playwrighting techniques, bring it into a poetry collection, bring out songs, make it a musical. So, many different pockets. And what I allowed myself to do is the ability to give myself permission to do that. Because the idea is because you're writing a poetry book, you must just attach poetry nuances and aesthetic because it's a poetry book. No, you bring in the world of everything you've learnt, and you make of it what you will. It's your world. Create it.

PW Absolutely. Now, you've spoken about dancing as storytelling. But what's next? What's on your wish list apart from the dancing as a storytelling?

YS I'm toying with the idea of a novel.

PW Yay. Come on.

YS People read that third section and they're like, why is it not a book? Why is it not a book? What's wrong with you? It's a simple reason. Sometimes listen, yeah, the size of a book is a weapon in it. There's the size of some books.

PW It's true.

YS Listen, I've seen certain sizes of books. I'm just like, how? What kind of brain capacity? How much time did you have to do a rewrite, a draft, the this...? That book is chunky. And I research and research. So, the whole idea of I'm just like, oh, this is long. And people look at me like, is that the only reason why? I'm just like, It's just long. But then I've seen amazing novels that are the size of *Manorism*. They're slim and you're able to write a whole novel with the slim book. That I can just tuck in my pocket something like this. And I'm like, so, it's doable. So, I think it's just about time. I've got numerous ideas I'm working on, but it's just about time and how I ease myself in. Like, I'm not trying to, I guess, I'm not trying to rush is what I'm trying to say, it will come when it comes. I give thanks.

In the same time that I was writing *Manorism*, like 2018, I was writing my next play and I submitted my next play. I submitted it like two months ago because I've been working it since 2018. So, now it's in the phase of just workshopping that play to see what happens. And I was writing both of them in tandem because before I used to write just one thing and focus on one thing, but now I'm like, okay, I'm able to write multiple things and just dip in and out of it and see how it goes. So, I'm very excited about the next play, and I just love those worlds. I love exploring those worlds and seeing what comes with it. But, yeah, I think I'm definitely flirting with the idea of a novel and what that looks like.

PC Okay. Yeah, I'm with you. I'm a playwright. That's a big one. A novel, I have thought about that. Yes. Pauline is in the middle of writing.

YS Oh, yes, so, that's why.

PC Yeah. That's why she has a very deep sympathy for what you're saying.

PW Exactly.

PC I'm going to ask you to be a bit more general now.

YS Go on.

PC Will you do a little horizon scanning for me, what do you think the challenges are facing writers at the minute? We're thinking about, I don't know, AI.

YS Challenges facing writers. The whole AI stuff, I haven't necessarily dipped into the big discussion. I've been seeing it around, like ChatGPT and all this stuff happening. I still feel like there's still the emotion of the writer that is written that, AI, as much as it might try to generate, I don't think it's going to fully, generate, but then in saying that, they'll always have prototypes and new versions of it until it becomes the most humanistic, emotional way possible, and you'll get to that point. I think some of the challenges, you know, I see a lot of remakes of stuff happening over time, and I don't know whether there's space for original stories to be told. And I wonder how there's a lot of call out for original stories, but I still feel like those original stories need to lean towards the time or the cause of the time or what have you. We went through a whole phase post George Floyd, where, every single organisation will talk about, here's our pledge. We pledge this, we pledge that, but your pledges doesn't necessarily make a community feel like, we don't know your history. We don't have the receipts of your behaviour. So, in coming to us with pledges, you still have to apologise, and you still have to be accountable for a lot of stuff that you've done. And what happens after that window of George Floyd goes? How open are you going to be to some of these stories? Why would we need

to explain ourselves 10 times over when other writers might just have to explain it once and that door is open automatically? So, I think those are some of those challenges. I wrote *Manorism* with the idea of a trollish nature, so to speak. It's the thought of the art critic who loves Caravaggio, will open up a book, will read that it's got Caravaggio referenced in it. Will read a title of a painting of Caravaggio's that the art critic knows, but then reads about this kid from South London. But now what that means is you're immediately accountable from something you've been trying to run away from. Because it's not like you're not privy to a lot of stuff that's happening, but that cognitive, that kind of, that dissonance from, I know this is happening down the road, but if I don't look at it, then it means I don't have to necessarily say anything about it. And I think it's that. I think there's something about writers need to lean into what their truths are. I don't even like to talk as a we, but I will in relation to this. I think there's something about not writing to the aesthetic of what they might feel will get them on the TV or wherever it is. Because it still speaks to a community, it still speaks to a people that I'll be like, we get why you've done this, but I would just want you to live in your truth. And I might be faced with that going forward. I did definitely have a moment at that like with the Patrick Hutchinson situation, where my communities will meet head on and where my moral stance will meet head on. And at that point, I have to decide a way forward because I'm going off on one. But I think there's a point in which writers start off with the core of their principles and the higher they grow, and in any art form, the higher they grow, it almost seems as if the more diluted some might become. And then we almost want to go back to the writer that was before they rose to prominence. And the thought is, only a few maintain their stance of, this is how I started, and nothing's changed. Even though I've got a million or so followers, I'm still here. And I want to know what's held that writer to get from a point of nobody knew who you were. And you were still bossy, you were still arrogant, you were still uncomfortable in terms of what you're talking about, but you're still here and you're still the same way. It's almost like a Grace Jones type thing. You're still here, but you're still revered, you're still respected, and you still speak to your truth without having to compromise any part of yourself. I'm interested in that kind of journey, and I think that's what writers might be faced with is, we're going to throw all of these dollars, all of these pounds your way. But what we're asking for in return, it might compromise a lot of things that you stood for before. And what does that look like? So, I don't know. I don't know.

PC I have to say, Wole Soyinka comes to mind as that writer who has never changed, who has held constantly to being what he was.

YS And what's the hold? Is it community? Is it principal? How much did you turn down? Some people care for the art. There's so many things, but I'm very interested in that, and I don't know how much room has been made for that conversation. And I think there's some kind of financial competence that needs to be explored as well in relation to writing, the thing of how much of that last gig pay, and there should be some transparency in just telling me how much that is, because you telling me that it's not going to make me now want to go higher just so we never get that gig again. But a lot of the different organisations, they pitch writers against each other all the time when it comes to money, because especially within a black community, I feel. Because they just know black folks might not talk about money because they don't want the other person to be trying to take their money. So, I think there's a lot of things when we're talking community that we need to explore in relation to financial transparency and being comfortable, to just be like, I got this, I got this, and be confident. Just being , you're not going to be watching my pocket. You're not trying to take my pocket. We're trying to all survive and grow in this together. In terms of what does financial literacy look like amongst writers, I think, is an important thing to explore as well.

PC I remember ages ago, Darcus Howe saying to me, it's not even the money per se. It's money as a measure of respect for your ability and experience.

YS 100%.

PC And I thought, I can live by that.

YS 100%, 100%, you know.

PC We're kind of wrapping up now, I think, Pauline has one last question.

YS Yeah, yeah.

PW Yes, this is a grand question. What are the best things about being Yomi Sode?

YS Oh, my God. How to make this not sound like I probably got these responses, not make it sound so mad narcissistic in life. In my heart I feel like I make space to listen more than I should. I feel like there might be some I might be going through a real emotional rut. Like, I really want to talk about what I'm going through, but if I meet with you, I will make the most space just to hear about you and what's happening with you. And I'll still offer as much advice and talk to you as possible. I like to delve in my curiosities a lot because I think in delving in my curiosities, great things come out of it. It scares me to the levels of how curious I can get in terms of just that dive into a story. But it's exciting and it's intriguing at the same time in terms of how deep I'm willing to go in terms of my curiosities. Yeah, I don't know. I love the arts experimenting. I think I'll stick with that. And if it's a story, if there's something that catches me in terms of a story, irrespective of what space it comes from, it has my full attention, and I will always compare it to something or try to make sense of it before I have an instant reaction to it. I've heard some harrowing stuff over time, but I still want to dip into the mind of whatever it is to have a well-rounded view of what was going on. And I think that's just how my mind works a lot of the time, because I have to make sense of it first in order to know how to process. I think that's me, I think that's me.

PC Yomi Şode, thank you very, very much for coming and talking with us.

YS Thank you. It's been absolutely, absolutely pleasure.

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