AFRICA IN DIALOGUE
INTERVIEWS WITH
GERALD KRAA K A R D A W A R D
SHORTLISTS

BY GAAMANGWE JOY MOGAMI
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INTRODUCTIONS by Gaamangwe Joy Mogami

To read is to have all your three eyes turned upside down, onto themselves, outwards to the world before and beneath you. It is to pull the veil and to discover the whole world: the one you know and the one you didn’t know existed out there and inside you. Reading Pride and Prejudice, the Gerald Kraak Anthology: African Perspectives on Gender, Social Justice and Sexuality was a mash-up of all my eyes turned up and down, sideways and at some point almost out of my eye sockets. It was a jarring experience, mostly because I didn't know how much I yearned to read these different and important perspectives on gender, sexuality and human rights. And when I went further and extended my experience of my reading, to engaging in dialogues with the writers of these incredibly, powerful stories, I entered an entirely new space of existence.

The thing of discussing and deciphering the meanings and ideologies of gender, sexuality and human rights is much like attempting to dissect and understand a magic spell. It is half of a whole experience because first of all to describe the spark that transmute thoughts into visual and emotionally-evoking imagery in stories is an elusive endeavour. We are yet to crack open the spell of where and how and why stories come to and through storytellers.

Second, gender and sexuality, social justice and human rights exists in many intersections, spectrums and understandings. The perspectives shared here are as vast and diverse as the seconds of the day. Our meditations travelled everywhere: the danger of homophobia and the origin of patriarchy and misogyny with Otosirieze; the invincibility of the clitoris and commercialized versions of sexuality with Tania; the homophobic bill and commodification of maternal health with Dilman; social advocacy of the human rights of people living with albinism with Sarah; how the system and communities fails LGBTI individuals and the lack of access to education with Beyers, grief and the gravity of the inhuman moments in our histories with Sindiswa; collective and domestic violence towards homosexual individuals with Olakunle; deeply entrenched shame towards nudity and acts of pleasure with Julia; the danger of anti-gay laws and the need for policy change with Ayodele; active resistance towards negative social attitudes of basic human rights with Farah and queer narratives and the intersection of sexuality and religion with Amatesiro. Together, we discovered there is much to learn, relearn and unlearn about gender, sexuality and human rights. We must be proactive about creating new narratives and meanings of ourselves and our humanity.
Otosirieze Obi-Young was born in Aba, Nigeria and attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His proposal for a novel was shortlisted for the 2016 Miles Morland Writing Scholarship. His short story, "You Sing of a Longing," was shortlisted for the 2016 Gerald Kraak Award. His first published story, “A Tenderer Blessing,” appears in Transition magazine and was nominated for a 2015 Pushcart Prize. His second story, "Mulumba," appears in The Threepenny Review and has been translated into the German. His essays appear in Interdisciplinary Academic Essays and Brittle Paper where he is Submissions Editor. He is the editor of the Art Naija series, a sequence of anthologies of writing and visual art which document aspects of Nigerian life. The first anthology, Enter Naija: The Book of Places, explores cities and marked Nigeria's 56th Independence anniversary. The second anthology, Work Naija: The Book of Vocations, explores professions and is forthcoming in June 2017. Otosirieze teaches English at Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu. When bored, he blogs popular culture at naijakulture.blogspot.com or just Googles Rihanna.
This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the serene university town of Nsukka, southeastern Nigeria by Email.

Gaamangwe: Otosirieze, Congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What did it mean for you to shortlisted for this award?

Otosirieze: Thank you, Gaamangwe. I think of this shortlisting in December of last year, the judges' choice of "You Sing of a Longing," as the moment my belief in my artistic instincts became unwavering. Of the three submissions I made, this was the one I felt the least confident about. I suspected I had taken things too far. But I couldn't bring myself to change a story that came to me the way it did. I wrote it in August, 2016. I had received a beautiful rejection from The Missouri Review, I think, the sort of rejection email that half-reads like a blurb. I'd gotten countless rejections at that point but that one destabilized me. I shared it with my friends, we joked about it. Before that rejection, I assumed I had completed my collection of stories, something I began in November, 2012 and which had tasked me emotionally. But after that rejection I felt something desperate. I wanted to convince myself that I can still write something satisfying at will, that I can wake up and get my laptop and write a story I would be proud of. It was frustration and I wanted to be artistically unhindered. "You Sing of a Longing" took me seven days to write. I renamed my collection after it. Still, I felt my other submissions were stronger. I laugh now to think I only chose it as filler because it captures human rights better than the rest, not because I was convinced it was as strong. So when it was shortlisted, I was breathless. Even amidst the excitement, I asked myself, but why not the other story? I sat down to think and realised that this story is one of the best things I'd done, that this shortlisting might have freed in me something I didn't know was tame in me: the willingness to dare. I'm not merely grateful that I was shortlisted, a bulk of my gratitude comes from their choice of this story—and what they said about it.

Gaamangwe: This is wonderful. I am happy that this shortlist came to you as it did. And now, knowing the backstory, I must saying there was an urgency in "You sing of a Longing" that goes beyond the character. I am thinking about this now, about our longings as human beings, and what it takes to fulfill them. Our longings can be as simple as the willingness to be true to oneself. What was important for you to articulate in "You sing of a Longing"? What longings did you discover about your characters and you, their creator, in the writing of "You Sing of a Longing"?

Otosirieze: All my life I have needed something else. For some things to be and for some others to never exist at all. The word "longing" is a prism through which I see, and have proceeded to explain to myself, a lot of the world around me. A lot of existence is cosmetic, a lot goes into becoming those versions of ourselves we want the world to see. I wanted to articulate my frustration with personal relationships, the power and unreliability and even rarity of love, how its offer or withdrawal can make or break. I wanted to articulate what it means for something to be unfinished: affection, purpose. I wanted to articulate what it means to be broken, to have a void in you while performing for the world. I wanted to get inside what it means to be queer.

To survive as a queer person in Nigeria, one needs to be rich, powerful or influential, or to be a damn good performer of heteronormativity. Naturally, fewer people belong to the first group so
most queer people perform to acceptability. But even in the first group are the ones whose power limits rather than frees them. Rather than be themselves in their secure places, their fears intensify and becomes helplessness. The singer in the story, Zukora, belongs here.

It was important to me to identify how, in pop culture as in politics, power is safety. The most influential Nigerians are entertainers, not politicians. Politicians have power but entertainers command astonishing influence here. One need only look at the loud response to Tu Face's announcement months ago that he would lead a protest to understand how a beloved entertainer can impact a national discussion. And this is where part of my frustration arises from: a seeming reluctance by most to use this influence to push for positivity.

I am not making the simplistic suggestion that queer entertainers should come out as queer simply because they occupy this special place in our culture—coming out, after all, is a personal decision—but it is so easy to see how, if this ever happened, it could help humanize and normalize queerness in the mind of the average Nigerian. Depending on their level of popularity, such an entertainer might not face the sort of backlash meted out to lesser known people. A considerable number of people would continue to love them, but most importantly, an even greater number would understand that their hatred for queerness is something they were taught, that it can be unlearned. Most would understand that they only hate queer people because they do not know any queer person close to their heart. Love, acquaintance, familiarity: these, in different ways, can destabilize hate. I long for this to happen.

In the time I spent thinking about Zukora, I found myself empowered to walk around my fears. I think of my characters as human beings, as people I might be aware of in real life. I am unsure, if he existed, whether I would be friends with Zukora—and I would like to. But I know that I would intensely admire him.

Gaamangwe: As I would too. Because I understood and deeply sympathies with Zukora's personal reality. I think about his helplessness in the face of all of his longings. I relate, as any human would, to the paralyzing essence of helplessness. And how our longings seem so daunting and unreachable when you are at the starting point. And I think how sometimes, freedom is also scary. Who I am without my performing, public persona? Our performing personas are intoxicating, enough to make us think these are the best version of ourselves.

Because, the world seems to be sustained by so many mis-truths. The world doesn't want to know alternative truths. So the single story thrives. I am playing devil's advocate here, and saying celebrities are complacent with using their powers to impact the world positively, because of helplessness. Also, hatred is searing to the human spirit, and so we ran away from it as much as we can. We all want to be loved and accepted. It's the cowardly way, but also the human way.

I have to say, Zukora is very brave. And we need more Zukora's in the world. Because yes, brave people empower us to walk with our fears. I wonder though, what fears did you walk around with? What did you confront and learn/relearn/unlearn about queer experiences? Also humor me here, what makes you unsure about a friendship with Zukora?
Otosirieze: We do need more Zukoras, even if their helplessness comes from an inadequate evaluation of their possibilities. However, because Zukora and celebrities like him come from lower class backgrounds, a lot can also be said about how grappling with new privilege contributes to theirs.

The first fear I walked with, as a child and until my later teenage years, might have been an inability to speak up. It terrified me. Why couldn't I say things? There was shyness; there was—and I shudder to think I went through this—a fear of acceptance, of recognition, of being seen. I wanted it but I feared it. I was too quiet, always silent, when in fact I had too much to say. It was not until a few years ago that I defeated this and seemingly became an opposite of my former self.

Whether or not Zukora and I could be friends if he existed is something I might have made simplistic but which isn't. He—with his reluctance to speak up—is that person I escaped. He—with his need for love and the validation that comes with love—is that person I have spent my life running from. I doubt I would want in my present something I spent my past disowning. I wanted him to be as different from the present me as possible, as different from any other character I've written. He isn't a talker, he isn't profound, but he acts for the things he believes in, even when knowing they could be flawed. In this sense, I also hoped for him to reflect what impatient critics of Nigerian pop culture might call "the average Nigerian celebrity"—the one who without his success, with only his person, would appear ordinary; the one who is likely to have nothing profound to offer outside their work. The one whose music is just good beats, whose lyrics are shallow.

I hoped for Zukora to exemplify what happens when unconquerable truths are canned tightly inside us: sometimes they erupt. But this only happens because he summons the bravery to follow his heart. And for all his lack, this is what matters the most.

And his experience has helped me interrogate mine. Because it breathes mostly in secrecy, love isn't cheap for a queer person in Nigeria. I have realised that it isn't at all free for a gay man, for example, because he is at the bottom of the acceptability chain and the likeliest to be visited with physical violence. Nigerian homophobia has tiers of discrimination. Bisexual woman, lesbian, bisexual man, homosexual man: in order of acceptability. And with the rising visibility of male cross-dressers, one is led to wonder whether transgender people would be placed above or below the lesbian. Needless to say, the heterosexual male reigns, followed by the heterosexual woman. I have learned how this "hierarchy" has to do with Nigerian men being more homophobic than women.

With the average, unprivileged gay man loving only in secret, every love he receives signifies something different, so that its loss is devastating—and this is even more so in the case of young people. Zukora, for example, never recovers from Dr Uzodinma's desertion of him, Dr Uzodinma who he looks up to, and this heartbreaking betrayal eventually shapes the man he becomes. He retreats from that identity. He never comes out to his manager, Chuka, and then wishes he had when Chuka dies. He learns to not expect genuine romantic affection, he turns down an offer at a club, and when he finally becomes interested in another man, Priye, he is quick to discard him. This is what mostly happens in Nigeria: a reluctance to indulge love.
Realising these hasn't been a happy experience. And it isn't even a uniform experience across the country. Like the Brunel Prize winning poet Romeo Oriogun pointed out, privilege is what decides how free you can be with your identity. I grew up in Aba, a commercial nerve center of Eastern Nigeria, a city notorious for its frequent resort to violence, and a poor gay man living there just doesn't have the same life as a not-poor gay man in Victoria Island, Lagos, or a rich gay in Abuja. Class, I have always been aware, makes oppression worse, but I have been surprised to find how wide the gulf is between privileged and unprivileged queer people in Nigeria.

Gaamangwe: I feel like the more I get to understand Zukora from your perspective, the more I admire him. I appreciate what he represents; what he speaks of and who he speaks for.

I grapple a lot with the gulfs among different group of people, and how their placement—depending on what boxes one can tick off—determines their experience in life. Why are we more understanding to people with fame, power and physical attraction? Why is it that the question of freedom and who is deserving changes the more one has likability factors in their favor? And how we are to navigate this as a world? What does that say about homophobia; what is the exact thing that people actually fear about homosexuality? I ask because I am slowly realizing how homophobia is far more complex and deeply entrenched into other factors that have nothing to do with sexuality and what "religion" and "nature" say about it.

Otosirieze: I think that our being more understanding with famous people comes mainly from two connected emotional places: our fear of separation from the symbol they have become, and our need for the reassurance their visibility provides. We are likelier to understand them because we fear losing them, because every misunderstanding is a step away from the safety they represent, away from that aspect of their humanity that we reflect ourselves in, and so we make compromises, we judge them less frequently, less harshly, because to do otherwise, to unlove them, would be to lose. This is also often true with attractive people we like.

The other reason has to do with the dynamics of our ability to change at all. We are lenient with famous people because—given what they represent, given that we project desired versions of ourselves on them—we need them to continue existing. Their existence, the obvious visibility of it, is a tangible reassurance of the validity of our beliefs. Our continued identification with them means we are also relevant.

I'm led to think that, for a considerable number of people, to unlove a particular celebrity would be to disassociate themselves from a particular way through which the world already sees them—and this isn't at all an inferiority complex or anything detrimental. An example is a lot of black women and Beyonce. A lot of queer people and Lady Gaga. (And I think, also, that this "relevance" can work the other way round, i.e. enable us to hate them).

Because celebrities have high visibility, because we already locate ourselves in their relevance, we find ourselves engaging whatever they represent—willingly or unwillingly. Because we don't always judge them, our deference also extends to that thing they represent. In this way, they are able to
influence us, change or reinforce our beliefs. And because of this reluctance to judge on our part, they also get away with things that the average person would not.

It is the same with people we like, the reason we are likelier to listen to people we love even when they are saying the same things others already said but that we ignored. The reason we are likelier to forgive people if we loved them. Because our world is at the mercy of people with power, influence, fame, our best bet would be hope. Hope that they always side with our humanity, that they would always project what would build rather than destroy us.

So if a Megastar-by-Nigerian-Standards were to call out homophobia—a Tu Face or P-Square or D'banj or WizKid or Davido—there are people who would become willing to reconsider their stand simply because it came from those particular celebrities. Because the said celebrity's support for the LGBTIQ cause will have made visible and normal what that person has been led to see as unusual and therefore abnormal. Homosexuality is difference and people fear difference, especially when such difference is yet to receive conventional acceptance. A famous person can accelerate acceptance by making such a difference visible, because with visibility comes that all-important normalisation.

People who could be so influenced are similarly likely to have a rethink if someone they loved came out to them as queer. Because their homophobia is fuelled by non-familiarity: the presumption that queer is the sort of thing that other people are, a thing that their loved ones cannot be, and so shouldn't be something they have to engage without following the norm.

When I engage curious homophobic people in person, the ones who genuinely want to know what queerness is, I explain to them the premise for the conversation. Two questions that saying yes to would confirm their willingness to discuss truthfully.
1. Do you believe that nobody knows everything?
2. Do you believe that no one can adequately and truthfully talk about something they haven't experienced?
If they say yes to those, then I would present three more questions because it is important that their words come from a place of genuine involvement. I ask them:
3. Are you queer?
4. Do you have a parent, sibling, close relative, close friend who is queer?
5. Have you ever had a heart-to-heart discussion with a queer person about their queerness?
If they say no to all, I then explain to them how knowledge of facts—the things they must have read about gays—is simply unequal to an experience of a truth. I tell them they cannot truly understand what queerness is if they have had no personal, non-sexual experience of it. Then I ask their pre-convictions. And I table mine.

Heterosexual male Nigerian homophobes are quick to announce that they don't want another man taking interest in them; and they actually fear this happening, which I've come to realize is psychological. To become the object of another man's affection would be, in their minds, to place them where over the years they have placed women: in a subordinate position where their bodies represent sexual fulfilment and the actualisation of domination. So their first instinct is to fight. They summon violence.
I am yet to see a heterosexual male Nigerian whose homophobia doesn’t soften when asked about lesbian sex. Why? Because lesbian sex would feed his male gaze. I once heard about lesbians who were forced to continue having sex after being caught, while the men watched and taped them. The men, the story went, were annoyed to find that girls who had turned them down had been fucking each other. And their rage was uncontrollable.

So there’s an underlying hypocrisy to the homophobia of a Nigerian heterosexual male. I know of several instances. I talk only of male homosexuals because they hold the power, and because a homosexual man’s homophobia has become heartbreakingly dangerous that any adequate discussion of it would demand a book.

Gaamangwe: And so sex is not only a weapon of power, domination and wars, it’s a tool that maintains patriarchy. I think of how the very act of it—from courtship to orgasm—are all the powers that are held and maintained by men. So how dare one rejects or negate those powers! How dare you insinuate that we are equal or god forbid inferior to the image we hold men to be? This comes in the way that homosexual males are thought to be less than a man. The “don’t be a sissy” ; meaning don’t be weak like a woman, don’t be inferior like a woman and don’t be sub-human like a woman.

Because if we have men who are like women, then everything that holds the patriarchal systems crumbles. Society cannot afford to have and accept the reality that; yes men are soft, yes men are vulnerable, yes men can love other men, because after all those are women things, and those are the exact women things that show that women are weak and that justify why we need a system that is sorely run by men. How do we then respond/shift/remove homophobia when its too deeply entrenched in deeply rooted ideologies of patriarchy?

Otosirieze: I do not think that an oppression like homophobia, deriving strength as it does from ubiquitous patriarchy, can be dismantled in isolation. I believe that central to systems of oppressions, in ways we might not have identified, is gender, because gender exists in that most conventional of binaries—masculinity vs femininity. Correct gender, acknowledge and ensure the accordance of equal rights and privileges to women, and we will have weakened a lot of things: homophobia, transphobia, biphobia.

Homophobia overlaps with misogyny. Heterosexual homophobes hate homosexuals because they disrupt their system of power, they assume positions not meant for them. The purportedly "dominant" lesbian often assumes masculinity, the purportedly "subordinate" gay often assumes femininity. The success of misogyny lies in ensuring that the dominating people are male and the subordinated people female. Which is why, like you pointed out, male weakness is immediately connected to femininity; all unconventional, softer masculinities are portrayed as feminine. And this equation of femaleness with weakness, this deliberate resort to misogyny in an issue that should exclusively be "male," is a defence mechanism that aims to reassert the primacy of a structure that had, to the male chauvinist homophobe, been temporarily challenged. In Things Fall Apart, for example, this structure roars back through Okonkwo who insists on masculinizing
his son, Nwoye, and keeping the world the way it should. But unlike Nwoye who can be bent to this oppressive masculinity, LBGTIQ relationships upend this structure in irreversible ways: they disorganize things and make roles unclear, and by so doing make oppression more difficult, and so they draw resentment, they generate the kind of frustration remediable only through, homophobes believe, hate.

If patriarchy did not adopt misogyny as its primary weapon, if there was no misogyny at all, then I do not think that homophobia would exist in the difficult way that it does. Because there would be no unprovoked fear by homophobes of being subjected to things they subject women to. Because there would not at all exist a system in which one gender is oppressed. Which in turn would make a masculine woman who loves a fellow woman or a feminine man who loves a fellow man or a man who transitions into a woman something normal. But then patriarchy already exists, armed with misogyny, and so homophobia, I suspect, can efficiently be shifted or disarmed with shifts in our gender relations.

Still, this is only one way of taking out homophobia, a root way that might prove tough in the long run due to the way issues proliferate in our world. All of this, though, is not to suggest that the LGBTIQ rights movement, as a full struggle of its own, would not be successful without tackling gender issues.

Gaamangwe: I am here thinking about what came first here; misogyny before patriarchy or the other way around? Was it that somewhere a "rupture" happened where suddenly the feminine energy was seen to be a danger to the masculine energy, enough and deep that the fear morphed into hate, and ultimately inspired the bearer of the "more" masculine energy to, in a gesture to "defend" themselves from feminine energy, create a society that will easily direct and control feminine energy?

I want to believe that there must have been a point in time where we all understood and appreciated the differences and necessity of feminine and masculinity energies. Where the status quo was polarities can co-exists and serve humanity differently but in an equal manner. What changed? And most importantly how do we get back there? How do we now correct our current understanding, treatment and experience of gender?

Otosirieze: There are huge implications in your pondering of misogyny and patriarchy. History has never been kind, generally, and one wonders how much more brutality it would reveal if unwritten from the male vantage and rewritten from a neutral perspective. I'm not sure I know what to say or how to say it, but I suspect patriarchy came first.
I don't think I've ever come across any social history that deals with this exactly, so I would refer to the Bible. With the way the book of Genesis is both written and taught, we are expected to blame Eve for Adam's failure. I find it interesting that the man—who we are told is the de jure leader and from whose rib the woman was formed—absolves himself of primary responsibility for his disobedience. Why does he push the blame to the woman when he is the older being?

This story—the idea that Eve came from Adam's rib—is obviously the inauguration of patriarchy. Someone had to be the first and—because God is supposedly a man—he made a man first and so the man became the leader of the woman, animals, plants, all creation. Given that Eve receives primary blame from Adam for Adam's own weakness, it is only logical to see this as the moment of "rupture" that you pointed out. The moment that feminine and masculine energies began to be seen not as complementary but as—for lack of a better word—rivals. The feminine was the usurper. I think this might have been sexual as well: Man must have been frustrated by his attraction to Woman, his seeming inability to exist without her, but because he cannot resist it, he resents her for having this power over him, despite that this power is mutual. This Biblical tale, I'm convinced, is the inauguration of misogyny. And, over the years, men have intensified this belief that, if they were to exist at their best, women had to be subjugated. If women had sexual power over them, they certainly shouldn't be allowed to have other things that they, the men, had. And so began the reality you capture so well as "a society that will easily direct and control feminine energy."

How to destroy patriarchy and misogyny? I don't know. The immensity of it makes me want to cry.

I have an essay forthcoming in Praxis magazine in which I have laid down a few of my convictions about gender. I think of the importance of so many things, the importance of plurality in our efforts. Patriarchy cannot be defeated in one way because it does not frustrate us in only one way. We need many, many loud voices.

The world needs a Beyonce whose marriage is important to her as much as it needs that feminist for whom men hold no charm. We need a Rihanna who wears a see-through dress because it's her body as much as we need a Taylor Swift who doesn't buy into nudity because, again, it's her body. And as difficult as it sounds, we very much need the character Isabelle Huppert plays in the film Elle, a woman who is raped but refuses to be a victim—and I know, being a man, that saying this is risky. But then we also need honesty.

Patriarchy is detailed; resistance to it must also be detailed. I think of the detailed power of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's suggestions in Dear Ijeawele as a starting social point. I think, too, of the system that allowed Rwanda to have the highest percentage of female parliamentarians in the world as a starting political point.
I'm worried on a professional level. The lead characters in my fiction are mostly gay men and so it bothers me that one day I might misjudge a female's story and let it be told by a man. It hasn't happened but I fear its possibility. Irrespective of how feminist a man is, he should never forget where he belongs: in a group that oppresses and continues to oppress women. With this, one sees how any #NotAllMenAreScum position is the dismissive gender equivalent of the intensely dishonest #AllLivesMatter.

Cultural production in Africa is no longer dominated by heterosexual men, not as it used to be. Literature, for example, is now run by women, and they are using it so well to fight back, to write their sex and gender back into history. The next generation of writers, the ones who began to blossom last year and would peak in five years' time, is dominated by people who are either queer or female and who have already begun to revolt against the normalized absence of their kind in literature. The coming decade, the 2020s, promises so much. But even if so much changes by that time, it would take considerable time for it to reach the grassroots which is where it should really worry us all. Because, soon, it might all come down to class differences. I am worried that cultural progress in Africa—generally and as regards LGBTIQ and gender rights—is proving very difficult partly due to the slow progress in our political cultures.

Gaamangwe: You have given me so much to think about. I am shifted. Thank you so much for this dialogue. There is a lot of work to do here, but yes we will get there. We are exactly where we need to be, and we are doing far much better than we realize. The idea is to keep at it, for ourselves, for the next generation.
Tania Haberland (formerly van Schalkwyk) is a pussy- and cock-loving poet, artist and body-worker. She won the Ingrid Jonker Prize for poetry in 2010 and is co-creator of a healing practice called Oceanic Somatics. Whether working with people or writing or creating, she is interested in ecstatic living.
This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and a beige bedroom in the sweltering hotspot of Milan, Italy by Call.

Gaamangwe: Congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak award. What did it mean for you to be shortlisted?

Tania: I was really happy and honored because of it being based around sexual freedom, human and gender rights in Africa. These issues are really important to me as a writer and in my personal and professional life. I often work and play around the issues of sexuality and gender. Apart from being nominated, I am happy that there is such an award. I am happy that there are people and organizations creating space and dialogues around this subject.

Gaamangwe. Absolutely. Reading this anthology was such a jarring experience. I didn't know we needed this kind of work until now because it is so important. Sometimes we get so comfortable in the world and we don't realise the importance of every single narrative concerning human rights.

Tania: Yes, I think that in today’s world, there is sort of a weird dichotomy between supposed sexual openness and freedom but a lot of the time we are completely closed. You find that the dialogues and the images that we are bombarded with on a daily basis are commercialised versions of our sexuality, and are socially constrained ones about what is appropriate and inappropriate. And even though it may seem more free than before, in a way it's another form of indoctrination. So when we hear alternative and different narratives like this, we open up. So instead of just freedom it's also about honesty and truth.

Gaamangwe: That is my exact sentiments. Sometimes our commercialized world can make us feel like we are talking about sexuality but most of the time we are only scratching the surface, in terms of how broad and dynamics sexuality is. We need to start having more dialogues that are that broad and inclusive, because most of the ones we are having are feeding and strengthening the current, limiting narratives and stereotypes of sexuality.

Tania: Yes, as a writer who is interested in narratives and stories, I know that the narratives we live by will influence our lives. The stories we tell about ourselves become our lives. For example, three simple words; apple, woman, snake is one of the biggest narratives we have. As soon as I hear these words, this whole concept comes up. So I am interested in playing with those concepts and transforming them.

Gaamangwe: That is powerful. You did this with your poem. What concepts were you trying to explore with the poem you submitted for this award?

Tania: Well, the ocean for me is a huge muse and I wrote this poem at a time when I was just beginning my second collection, which is called “Other”. I actually started in a physical way, because I work a lot with the senses. So at the time, I was going to the ocean everyday, swimming. And it was really cold for me because I had spent most of my life in Mauritian and Arabian waters so I am used to warm water. So I began to feel how other this water was, how cold it was and learning to
embrace and allow it to be and to become one with it. The water became my muse and I started seeing it as a male entity and I began writing a series of poems about water and the male muse, connecting myths around male sea gods with the fact that we are 70 to 80 percent water and that there are all these bodies of water around the planet: seas, oceans, lakes, rivers...so planet earth is also 70 to 80 percent water. So I started thinking about that together and trying to see the world as other, a beloved stranger as opposed to a narcissistic reflection of myself. So that was some of the concept behind it. It was inspired by a quote from Pascale in a book by Gaston Bachelard called The Poetics of Space.

I was interested in how the shell is often hard, beautiful not pretty painful to create but such an object of delight, and how the mollusk within is like the clitoris, which is often unseen. I wanted to honor that.

Also it was a moment when I was going through a difficult time, a violent divorce and so when I was there, working and writing, it became an awakening and letting go of a time that was very deadly, or perhaps deathly in the sense of not having been able to express myself sexually (and therefore not being fully alive) and also of having been in physical danger.

Gaamangwe: That is powerful. I am thinking about how yes, the clitoris is unseen, neglected and rarely brought up in conversations of sexuality with our partners, and even with ourselves. But the clitoris is this vast and untapped thing, like the ocean. What could we learn about bodies, sexuality and ourselves if we did explore more dialogues about the clitoris?

Tania: From a personal perspective and from the works I have read, I find that for a while there was a social denigration of the clitoris, I mean it was not being considered at all right? Then there was the denial of the clitoris in the name of the G-spot and the idea that it was in a way a midget penis or something like that. (when in fact the clitoris and g spot etc are all part of the same interconnected organ of pleasure, there is no real separation) So there are all these perspectives that don’t allow for a broader and more imaginative way of experiencing it. I am also thinking that the evolution of the human being has a lot to do with the clitoris, in the sense that the female human is one of the only animals that when she has sex and an orgasm, it’s not only for procreation. When the woman orgasms, it doesn’t always have to do with the procreation process, while for the man every ejaculation there is a possibility of creating life. So the clitoris is there truly for pleasure and not just procreation. So that is a powerful thing to realise because we live in an oxymoronic society where hedonism is both ostracized and over-identified with at the same time. So the fact that the clitoris is an instrument of pleasure, that its function goes beyond just procreation is powerful and beautiful. It is not just there, it is useful in its application to useless pleasure in the face of a society dedicated to work, etc.

Gaamangwe: That is an important perspective, especially when we look at the disheartening realities of Female Genital Mutilation, where the clitoris has been used as a powerful tool to restrict female pleasure in some parts of Africa and the world.
Pleasure is an aphrodisiac and we all need to experience it. The clitoris is as vast, as feared and unknown as the ocean. The way that we engage with it is like the way someone who doesn't know how to swim engages with the ocean.

Tania: Yeah. I like that. I think we have to own our pleasure, speak and write about it from our own perspective and not from what we think people want to hear or what we should be saying. Because we are extremely influenced by the society we live in, so we have to speak about our experiences. Sometimes I wonder, is what I experience actually my experience or what I was told to experience? So we have to speak and write about what feels more authentic inside our bodies, so that we can start to understand our own sexuality as women.

Gaamangwe: It is important to re-write the narratives that existing about our bodies and sexuality, mostly because half of the times, these narratives are not written or created by us. Tania, Thank you so much for your writing, and for this poem.
DILMAN DILA

Dilman Dila is a writer, film maker and a social activist from Uganda. He is the author of *Cranes Crest at Sunset* and *A Killing in the Sun*. His work has been recognized by internationals awards such the Jalada Prize for Literature (2015), the BBC International Radio Scriptwriting Competition (2014), the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2013), Short Story Day Africa prize, (2013 and 2014), and Million Writers Awards (2008). His works has been published in The Sunday Vision, The African Roar 2013, Storymoja, The Kathmandu Post, The Swamp, Dark Fire, Shadow Sword and Gowanus Books.
Gaamangwe: Congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does being shortlisted for this award?

Dilman: As a writer, being shortlisted for any award gives almost the same benefits, that is, not just a boost to your career, but also an encouragement to your writing. We deal with a lot of rejection, a lot of self doubt, and honestly it is never a certainty that people will like your work, so when you get into an award like this you, it's a sign that you are on the right track.

The story I submitted I wrote specifically for this award. When I first heard of the award I did not know of Gerald Kraak, but the day I read about him I got an idea for the story, and I wrote the first draft in two days, although it is about 7000 words. The themes of the story had bothered me for many years, and I had tried to tell stories based on them a lot before, so this was not a surprise that the story came out so easily. I have a problem with the world today, especially the way the dominant religions view morality and how they try to make everyone conform to their standards. When Uganda was debating the anti-homosexuality bill, I did not want it to pass because then I would have been a criminal. It required that everyone must report the gay people they know, and I have several gay people close to me. The bill was killed, but I always wanted to write a story based on that world, where I might have been a criminal simply for not reporting a love affair that the state thinks is illegal. I also don't like the way capitalism has commodified everything, including procreation, and I have been making a documentary film for a while now, about maternal health in Uganda, and this theme kind of came into the story as well. Yes, I don't hesitate to say my stories are always political, and even autobiographical. I have no problem saying this for I know the stories I write are often character-driven and very engaging, and the thematic concerns often take a back seat to the plot. That's why I like this story very much. It is science fiction, set in a secondary world, where we have a Christian Utopia in Africa, and I don't think a reader will tell where I was coming from with these themes (re: the homophobic bill and the commodification of maternal health) but I think they will enjoy it a lot and will get to think about these themes.

Gaamangwe: These are interesting and powerful themes. Homophobia particularly in Africa nowadays is astoundingly thriving. The interplay of religion, the fear of the unknown and our very reluctance to engage in more in-depth dialogues and understandings of human sexuality are clearly creating a world that is, sometimes I fear, slowly morphing into the world in your story.

But perhaps what you were saying and adding to the narrative is how political human sexuality is. Much of what goes on, in people's private spaces, is governed and scrutinized
by not just the public but the government too. So now, we must address how this shifts the dynamics of what we think and believe about sexuality, in particular homosexuality. How free do people experience their sexuality when tomorrow their sexuality may become a crime? How was the collective responses to the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda?

Dilman: Yes, it is true, sexuality has always been political, from the time human societies became patriarchal and thus saw sex as a means of reproduction. But I also think that regardless of what the government and public think, people will always find a way to enjoy their lives and sexuality, maybe not freely, maybe with a bit of fear, but no amount of political repression can destroy it, which is what I was trying to bring across in the story. Love will always go underground, and flourish right under the nose of those who try to stop it.

In Uganda, at the time the bill was being debated, the sentiment was "why should the police/government interfere with people's private lives?" Even those who did not support homosexuality raised this question, and the subtext was that gay people have always been with us and the society always simply looked away. The raising homophobia could also be because gay people are coming out openly, and trying to live the way they see their counterparts in Europe and America living, rather than keeping things the way they are (and this is why some people claim it is an imported culture). It thrived in schools when I was growing up in the 90s and at that time there was no hatred against them. Boys would express their desire to experiment without fear. I also think many married couples had gay relationships. There are people who were always so close to each other, women who were so close they came off as sisters, men who were always in each other's companies, and to the world these people were just very close friends. I have a friend who told me that when he was growing up, there was a woman who was so close to his mother that he thought this woman was his aunt, only as an adult did he realise the woman was just a close friend of his mother. And yet, he had seen this woman share a bed with his mother. If you looked around, you would find many such examples, and it is not to say that all these relationships are gay in nature, some could be just platonic friendships, but it is generally believed that this is how gay relationships thrived in the recent past, before many started coming out in the open and hence leading to homophobia and things like the bill. And that sentiment was in Uganda when the bill was being passed, I think was influenced it. And even as people asked the question why should the government interfere in private affairs, they also wondered why the gay people were marching in the streets proclaiming their gayness. They tended to think gay people were upsetting the status quo (re: living gay happily behind closed doors, while openly being married with children).

Gaamangwe: Oh there is so much faultiness with this sentiment that "why are gay people marching in the streets proclaiming their gayness". It says gay people should be secretive because we as society will rather not deal with the possibility that our ideas of sexuality are not as static as we want them to be. Society has a fear of both the unknown and discomfort, and it will rather hide that discomfort rather engage.
Gay people are marching the streets because they are fighting for their rights. People should live however way that they want. Why is it that society enjoys policing other people's choices and experiences? Yes, love always finds a way to thrive, even if it's in secret, but this should not be the case. Why do we have a lot to say about how the world should work? Why can't people love who they love, and experience their sexuality and bodies as they want?

Dilman: I think I spoke about it a little, that it comes down to what people think is the role of sex in a society. The generally agreed mainstream view is that it is for reproduction, and so sex that isn't geared towards that is frowned upon, which is why promiscuity and prostitution are considered immoral, for example. I think the Bible was against homosexuality and masturbation because of that reason "wasting seeds" and nothing else. I might have read that somewhere. So as western countries became more and more christian, they took on a biblical stand against this. And I think in African societies tolerated gay relationships as long as the people involved bothered to procreate (re: what I said earlier about our parents having very close people of the same sex that we thought they were aunties and uncles) which would explain the anger of recent times, re: why do they have to march in the streets? Why can't they continue doing it in secret while being married to opposite sex? Coming out openly also means you denounce sex as being purely/mainly for procreating. From the little I have read about gay relationships in precolonial africa, and from what I witnessed and overheard before homophobia took root, I think most gays were bisexual. I am not an authority on this, but that is the feeling I got.

I believe in the future, as technology evolves and has a bigger say in procreation, maybe through cloning and artificial wombs, there may not be a need for society to police sexuality, as procreation won't happen through sex alone. We are already seeing that in today's world, with people using In Vitro fertilization and children being born without sex involved, which might have made gay people to become bolder and seek marriages and children, but if technology becomes so efficient that human populations can continue to grow without relying on sex, then there won't be a need to govern sexuality. I know there may be a rise of "a naturalist" movement, of which I would belong to, for I fear a future where everything is cloned or done in labs, and machines mother our children, but the subliminal fear that society will collapse without sex for procreation, hence giving people more sexual freedoms.

Gaamangwe: This is an illuminating take on sexuality Dilman. Fear has always been such a crippling tool in perpetuating an ideology, but I do wonder if you think that removing the ideology that sex is for procreation will actually remove homophobia and patriarchy? How can we change this narrative, in particular looking at how religion is at the forefront of narrating the meaning of sexuality to us? Sometimes it seems to arrive to sexual freedom, we have to break a lot of systems that sustains the absence of this freedom.
Dilman: I think humans will always find a reason to discriminate against people who are not like them. If there was only one race, then it might be the shape of the ears that is the basis of discrimination. Similarly if there was only one gender, you might find something like the shape of the head being a basis for discrimination. Changes in reproductive technology may lead to less homophobia, but in our current society, religious and patriarchal views of reproduction gave rise to homophobia, so yes, anything that changes will reduce homophobia. I am not sure I have all the answers, other than to keep telling stories that influence people to challenge the dominant world view.

Gaamangwe: For sure, this is how we shift worldviews. What narratives/dialogues/spaces do you hope your story will open, particularly in the political and social spaces in Uganda?

Dilman: I didn't write that story with a political agenda in mind, so I don't have expectations on what narratives/dialogues/spaces it may open. While most of my stories are steeped in what could be considered activism, I aim for entertainment above everything else, I do not carefully consider the messages, I only focus on the plot and the characters, everything else is secondary. So in writing it, first I wanted to tell the story of two women determined to consummate their love, no matter the forces against them. The homophobia and the anti-gay bill that it is thematically based on, only served to provide a huge obstacle to the lovers, but it really was not my focus, nor any preaching. I kept my eyes on Amoit and her lover, and whatever a reader takes from that is totally up to the reader. My job is in telling the story and I hope I did it well.

Gaamangwe: Thank you for telling your story Dilman.
Sarah Waiswa is a Ugandan born Kenya based documentary and portrait photographer with an interest in exploring identity on the African continent, particularly the New African Identity. Her work focuses on changing the narrative on Africa by generating dialogue on developing issues through visual documentation. She is a full time photographer with a desire to illustrate the plight of various social issues on the continent, in a contemporary and non-traditional way. She hopes to change the narrative on Africa by generating dialogue on developing issues as they happen, through creating visual poetry and telling stories in the most organic and creative way possible.
This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and a warm haven in Nairobi, Kenya by Email.

Gaamangwe: Congratulations for being shortlisted and winning the Gerald Kraak Award! What does it mean to you to have been shortlisted for this award?

Sarah: Thank you! It is a great honour, I am truly humbled. As a human being and a photographer, I am grateful that I can engage in and create work that advocates for social justice for all and for this work to be recognised, encourages me to continue with the work.

Gaamangwe: Wonderful! What narratives did you hope to advocate for with your work for the award?

Sarah: Primarily I wanted to open up the discussion on the human rights issues related to people with albinism in parts of Africa, coupled with the additional challenges faced by women. I have always been passionate about equal opportunity and rights for all, from as early as I can remember. I think my education in both sociology and psychology afforded me the opportunity to study social and human systems, which are evident in the approach to my work.

Gaamangwe: Here in Botswana, we do have concerns with Albinism but they are not as harsh as they are in other parts of Africa. What's the current state of human rights issues for people with Albinism in Kenya, and what in particular did you want to illuminate about the human rights issues (I imagine the concerns are vastly different as you go in different areas in Kenya, Africa and the world)?

Sarah: Most of the atrocities and injustices I read about and researched were the most intense in Tanzania, where albinos have been hunted for their body parts, because of the belief that they possessed some "magical" powers. I wanted to raise awareness with the series, by humanising people with albinism, and by presenting the subject in a non stereotypical way.

Gaamangwe: What inspired and how did you decide on the whole aesthetics of the work? How was the experience of taking the photos especially since some of the photos were in public? I found that quite powerful.

Sarah: A lot of what you see of Florence (the model) was a representation of self. Her purple hair for example was her own, and that was what attracted me to her as a person—how confident and strong she is. I worked with Ghanaian artist Jojo Abott to help style and direct the shoot. The entire series was shot in public, and the reactions captured were as they actually were, I believe shooting in public enhanced the theme of isolation.
Isolation is linked indefinitely to the sense of non belonging that accompanies being different, from what society views or has assigned to the norm. Outside albinism, this sense of non belonging resonates with many of us because of our otherness. Florence was a symbol of otherness...

Gaamangwe: I am very interested in this feeling of otherness. How we navigate the world as "othered" people and what the world or what society needs to shift for us to remove this feeling of isolation a lot of people feel. But I sensed that even in her non-belonging Florence had found a way to exists in the world in her own term.

Did you think a lot about the world that Florence was captured in? The people and the overall landscape? And what that might insinuate about; which worlds are more accepting and which ones aren't?

Sarah: On “But I sensed that even in her non-belonging Florence had found a way to exists in the world in her own term.” Don't we all? What is the option?

Yes I think about a lot about the world Florence was captured in, because it is the world we all live in. You can have money and great success and wealth and still be the other. The world Florence is captured in is visually chaotic, but is symbolic of the chaos in the world in general. The reality is no matter who, where or what you are, human beings create social structures that are often times exclusive and only end up benefitting the more privileged and dominant members of the society.

Gaamangwe: Sometimes it feels like this social structure that is exclusive is static, like we cannot actually shift it to arrive to that Utopia world of inclusion. Too many variables that create and sustain this chaotic world. But of course we have to try in our little corners of the world.

In what ways do you want to contribute to the world dialogue/narratives as a photographer? What do you want to create with your art, taking ofcourse into account that this is ever evolving?

Sarah: Right now I'm more interested in the African dialogue and the African narrative. Using my art to generate discussions and highlight social issues on the continent.

I want to create powHERful stories, stories that challenge norms, stories that link the past, present and future, stories that get people to challenge what they think they know about others and themselves.
Gaamangwe: Thank you Sarah. I resonate so much with African dialogues and narratives that challenge the status quo. Power to that! It's been a pleasure talking to you.
Beyers de Vos is a writer and journalist based in Cape Town, South Africa. His first novel, Talion, will be published in 2018.
“This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and a balcony beneath Table Mountain, Cape Town, South Africa by Email.”

Gaamangwe: Once again, congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted?

Beyers: It is, of course, a great honour to be shortlisted, and very unexpected. There is something about having your work recognised like this that is amazingly powerful for your confidence as a writer. You are always doubting whether your work should be out there, so this kind of recognition provides you with the audacity you need to keep writing. This particular piece I am very excited about because of all the things I've written, this is a story I am particularly close to, and one that I've always felt deserved to be read. Not for me, but because the subject of the story was so brave in sharing it. So for it to finally be published is a momentous thing.

Gaamangwe: I was deeply shifted by your story, and the bravery of the subject. I remember after reading and crying, I had to take a walk, to allow my spirit to swim in the searing bravery of Peter* and his experiences. What drew you to this story? Why was it important for you to tell this story?

Beyers: Well, I found this particular story by chance. What drew me was Pride Shelter—the LGBTI homeless shelter in Cape Town. I heard about it through friends of mine while researching another story. This led me to the shelter, where I met Peter. He was so open and honest about what had happened to him that I ended up changing the focus of my piece. For someone to trust you like that—to be that willing to talk about their trauma with you, it's a deeply intimate and privileged position, and it consumed me. It was a difficult story to confront, which in my experience means it is absolutely necessary to do so. It's a story that has an urgency about it, a cathartic element—Peter wanted and needed to talk about what had happened to him. At first it was a story I wanted to tell to create awareness around the shelter. About this one corner of the world that provided a haven to vulnerable people, but of course it became about more than that. It became about all the ways this person—and so many people like him—are failed by the system and the communities they belong to. I am still grappling with that.

Gaamangwe: I think a lot about this; the collective roles of humans in the enabling and creation of painful, traumatizing experiences for minorities. We have created two worlds, one world for the majority, and another world for the minority, where dehumanization and violence thrives.

Did you have any illumination about the holistic ways that we as society actually fail LGBTI individuals? The intricate ways that we have created this system that fails others, and the
intricate ways that we maintain it? And lastly, on a personal level, what were the most difficulty aspects to confront?

Beyers: That is a very complex and diverse question, one that has different answers in different places. There are many places across the world that practise systematic and codified discrimination against minorities. In South Africa we are fortunate that, at least on paper, minorities are protected. This doesn't mean that the system still hasn't failed them; it's a system that can be very apathetic and is still not equipped to deal with the specific needs of LGBTI people. A system, as Peter's story shows, operated and maintained by homophobes. I cannot begin to understand the complexities and subtleties of this system and what kind of corrective action should be taken, beyond the belief that homophobia needs to be exposed—dragged into the light and destroyed, and if government won't do it then civil society must. Whatever role the writer can play in that, they must do everything they can to tell stories that combat homophobia.

Access is the main problem, I think. Access to education, access to healthcare, access to safe spaces. Hatred comes from ignorance and the most powerful way to counteract that is through education. Tolerance is something we have to be taught. We have a failure of education about LGBTI issues in South Africa, which creates a spiral that tacitly aids and even encourages oppression against minorities. This is not even taking into account the reality of those systems—both official and unofficial—that actively teaches homophobia.

On a personal level, what was most difficult to confront was that it was happening on my own doorstep. That I had been largely blind to it. I had to confront my own privilege as a member of the LGBTI community—how do I reconcile my own relatively discrimination-free experience as a gay man with someone whose experience is so rife with discrimination? What is my role in the system? How do I correct the inequality that exists between us? Is writing about it enough—is telling the story enough? I'm not sure I've answered any of those questions yet.

Gaamangwe: I think that writing the story is very important, because as you mentioned accessibility is a huge problem. There are far too many of us who are largely blind to it. So this story is the beginning of bridging the gap, making LGBTI experiences accessible. Because with awareness, hopefully comes proactiveness to change those basic but paramount necessities.

I understand and resonate with your feelings about reconciling the discrepancy that exists between you and Peter. I have the same feelings every time I connect with another woman who faces far more violence and oppression. What do you think in your case enabled this discrepancy? As in, what in your reality has facilitated a discrimination-free experience?
Beyers: I think in my case what facilitated that experience was my family's relative wealth, and the privilege that comes with that. As well as the inherent privilege that comes from being a white man, both within and without the LGBTI community. I grew up in a very liberal household, and was sent to liberal schools and universities. Yes, I have encountered homophobia and bullying, and I don't doubt that I've been discriminated against. But nothing compared to the institutionalised marginalisation that comes with poverty, or within communities less tolerant than the ones I had access to growing up, and still do. It has made it easier for me to be gay, I think. And I try never to take that for granted.

Gaamangwe: Accessibility to alternative understandings of human sexuality is so paramount in marginalized communities. Vigorous education, a lot of unlearning and relearning is vital. Yet the very state of marginalized communities makes it difficult to actually create platforms that combat this. You know, hierarchy of needs.

This is why centers like Pride centers are so important. Safe spaces for recuperating, introspection and healing. I hope that one day, centers like this can exists everywhere in Africa and the world (although the bigger picture is that we get to a space where we never have to need them).

But you know looking at how vast and interconnected the issues that Peter faced, I also think about how effective these spaces are? I felt sad that he still needed to leave soon even though he still didn't actually have a plan on what to do after. Doesn't that feeds into the cycle, that possibly without any other choice, he might go back to the abusive environment he left before? I think a lot about creating spaces that equip survivors of any violence, but I think we need to think beyond just emotionally support but also financial support.

Beyers: Yes, I do agree. The system isn't perfect, and long term support is still lacking. I do think what Pride Shelter does – putting survivors in touch with groups that can assist them, with healthcare facilities, with rehabilitation options, is all they can do with the resources they have as a private institution. They have a policy which says that people who live there need to be out during the day looking for work, and they actively encourage people to seek out employment in order to make sure they land on their feet. But there is limited space and they cannot shelter people forever; I think what's missing are the necessary state services that need to take over the process once places like Pride Shelter no longer can, and make sure that the support that Pride Shelter provided is continued and reinforced. This is the government's responsibility.

Gaamangwe: Wonderful. Thank you for joining me in this important dialogue.
Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese was born in 1990 in Durban. She is currently based in Stellenbosch and is a PhD student at Stellenbosch University. She has recently published her first collection of poetry, titled Loud and Yellow Laughter and published by Botsotso. She has also published several poems in various local poetry journals such as Jacana Media, New Coin, New Contrast, Prufrock, Aerodrome and Ons Klyntji and has featured in the Sol Plaatje European Union Anthology. She was awarded second place for the 2015 Sol Plaatje European Union Award for her poem Portrait of a Mother and Indiscretion.
This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and a damp, staircase in Stellenbosch, South Africa by Email.

Gaamangwe: Congratulations once again for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does it mean for you to be shortlisted?

Sindiswa: For me, to be shortlisted in the Gerald Kraak Award and Pride and Prejudice, means being part of a large heritage. A rich and complex heritage of imaginative thinking and resistance, and therefore creative activism. I don't mean some sort of static inheritance which is passed down to the next generation, but rather a living heritage which bleeds into, in-between, through, over and under like roots. A heritage whose outgrowths reach ceaselessly towards new spaces, new narratives that emerge at the intersection of gender, sexuality and humxn rights. To be part of this, is to be part of an inheritance which is rhizomatic, in ways that are tangible and intangible, is to be part of a creative unity that is always multiple in itself.

Gaamangwe: I think this rich, complex and ever-flowing, ever-evolving heritage is powerful because as you said, the new spaces and narratives that emerge create a whole entire culture. A world that we, hopefully, is for all of us. What is your creative activism saying? What new spaces and narrative did you want to birth with the work for this anthology?

Sindiswa: I'm never entirely certain of what my work is saying. Maybe I secretly want to avoid such traps. However, I'm drawn towards things that I find unsayable. Things we might not have a vocabulary for, yet we're able to feel the tone of it in our bodies. Those things that begin through the body, said through the small grammars of gesture or a quick glance. Midnight in Lusikisiki (or the Ruin of the Gentlewomen) was about an inhuman moment in history. Yet the gravity of the Marikana massacre is something utterly unsayable. The body, however, has its own language. It's a language that I often find more revealing than speech. I hope to write stories in and from that interior language, perhaps this is a kind of creative activism.

Gaamangwe: We do carry our griefs and sorrows in our bodies. I recently talked to Mahtem Shiferaw on The Poetry of the Body and she too is of the same sentiment, of the beautiful world of our bodies, of how they carry and bear witness on all the things we, sometimes, also push in and within the borders beyond memory. But yes, to notice this, to write in and from the interior language is creative activism, which is so important and vital.

Are the women remembering and grieving for the men who died during the Marikana Massacre? I find the connection between your speakers and this inhuman moment of the Marikana Massacre quite fascinating.

Sindiswa: I don't know who they grieving for. I suppose grief can never be so clear cut, there are a range of levels. They have been excavated of something, as we all have. But I would hope that grief (personal and collective) is not the totality of my creative work. Such a reading would be an oversimplification. There are other things happening within the work. South Africa, is resilient.
We're known as one of the friendliest nations in the world. I suppose I'm extremely fascinated with this culture of laughter, our ability to smile in the face of it all. This is something my work is very concerned with. It's personal because I'm part of the collective, I'm intrigued by what I see as a kind of hell-bent smiling which almost cracks the face. I'm interested with what lies beneath the smile of our 'friendly nation'. What does the smile conceal? Is laughter and smiling truly an act of resistance? All these small gestures, these micro facial expressions are really interesting to me. I'm trying to find a language for the things that we as a nation try so hard to contain behind our 'friendly' composure(s).

Gaamangwe: Our laughter and smiles are how we thrive and how we claim our humanity. But yes, there is somewhere and someway that we also seem to handle our suffering with silence, with quietness, with repression. But then what can we do? We cannot sometimes afford to fall apart, perhaps the laughter and smiling is as much of a resistance as a way of elegantly falling apart.

Perhaps this is even more true for women, because women do carry so much of our personal and collective griefs and sorrows. How important was it having women speakers in your work?

Sindiswa: The same womxn who carry grief, are the same womxn also who birth joy. It's complex. The one experience can't exist without the other, womxn are not singular. Womxn exist in a simultaneous way, but so do men. Womxn speakers are central to my work precisely because through womxn I feel I've inherited a more somatic language.

Gaamangwe: Moving forward, in what ways and spaces do you hope to contribute to the world dialogue/narrative? What do you want to create with your art (taking of-course into account that this is ever evolving)?

Sindiswa: That's a tough question, and I find it almost impossible to answer. It's all been said before, but I'll echo it here, I fiercely defend and claim the freedom to write however I want, I'm not interested in pandering to any narrow assumptions. I hope the quiet audacity to write in such a way is always in service to readers, writers and listeners.

Gaamangwe: Thank you for joining me in this dialogue Sindiswa.
Olakunle Ologunro's writing has appeared on Litro UK, Queer Africa, and elsewhere. He is a student of English Language in the University of Ilorin, and an alumnus of the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop.
Gaamangwe: Once again, Congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does being shortlisted mean to you?

Olakunle: Thank you, Gaamangwe. As a writer, being shortlisted is a victory. Because writing is a pathway filled with rejections and very small flashes of light along the way, being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award is, to me, a comfortingly bright light, a 'Yes, we see what you are doing and we appreciate it,' kind of comfort.

As a human being, being shortlisted makes me glad, because it means that the story I have chosen to tell and the realities I have portrayed will reach people who are familiar with such realities, people who know the experience as well as they know their mother's name. And it makes me glad, too, because to people who are not aware of such realities or who do not know that such problems exist, this story will acknowledge the existence of such problems. And acknowledging the existence of a problem, to me, is the first way of tackling that problem.

Gaamangwe: I definitely agree. Your story rendered a very humane exploration of domestic violence realities in a relationship. But you also intricately weaved all these various aspects of human relationships (psychological histories of the characters, society's ideologies on homosexuality, and religion) that "create" and "sustain" violence.

Because after all, the thing about violence is that it does not exists in a vacuum. It's not a singular thing that can be merely stopped just like that, right?

Did you think a lot about how these aspects interplay to create Ibrahim's violence and also make the narrator stay? Do you think that the modern realities of homosexuality (potentiality of being attacked for being one, especially in Africa) sustained this violence? I think a lot about how leaving is not as easy as we might think.

Olakunle: Yes, you are right. Violence is not a singular thing that can be merely stopped just like that. People need to unlearn all of the things that society, religion and existence has taught them, in order to actively begin the process of uprooting violence. But with the way we are now as a people, the possibility of that unlearning is so so bleak. Now, violence is so commonplace that the first response to it is to look away, and when it's starting to concern you, make a surface effort so that it doesn't appear that you are not doing anything. Now, when we hear stories of a man hitting a woman, the first response that follow it is something along the lines of: "Are you sure she did not provoke him first?" Recently, I was reading, on an online forum, the story of a man who publicly beat his wife. It happened in Nigeria, in Ilorin. Photos showed the woman in an already torn wrapper, beaten and thrown in the dust. One of the man who had come to watch and, I presume, take photos, helped her carry her baby and another tried to lift her up. The second comment on that
post was from a moniker (an online ID, I guess) that had the letter 'F' for female. And the person's comment was:

*Buhari has reduced so many good men to beasts because of economic frustration. This man might be rich under Jonathan regime, now he is a wife beating hungry lunatic because of hardship.*

*Pity.*

And just while I was wondering if "economic frustration", is enough reason to batter a woman, another commenter said:

*why the wife have to wait for the beast in that man to be unleashed on her to this extent she needs to be evaluated mentally.*

Now Gaamangwe, this is interesting: the first comment had 134 likes and 11 shares, and the second had 19 likes. Isn't the world progressing in educating people on domestic violence?

If I had to give a reason -- apart from the reasons he gave -- why Ahmed stayed, it would be what I call the "waiting" period. That period when you sit in the rain and tell yourself that soon, it will be over, after all it was all dry before. That period when you stay in a bad relationship, a bad job, and you wait, hoping that it will turn around easily. And because the abuser, like Ibrahim, has sane moments that remind you of how good things used to be, or how they used to put food in your belly, you tell yourself, "Wait a little more. Wait and see if it will happen again."

For Ahmed, yes, leaving is never easy as we think it is, but I feel that he weighed the greater one: the collective violence of the society to homosexuals and effeminate men, and the single violence of a lover, and he chose to stay with what seemed the lesser and milder one when, in truth, no form of violence is ever less or mild.

And it was all of this, I think: the vulnerability of Ahmed, his human-ness, his "waiting", that kept Ibrahim going, knowing fully well that at the end of it all, Ahmed would always remain.

**Gaamangwe:** I am appalled by the current state of things when it comes to domestic violence in Africa and the world. Absolutely outraged that there are custodians of violence, people who seems to only understand and explain violence as the "fault of the victim". How maddening it is that it's another woman, no less! Our society is so big on shaming. The world has simple decided that anything that is "different", "other", "unknown" will be shamed, feared and violated.

We need to actually look at our whole systems of governance (not just politically), but all these systems that inform us of how to be human. Because I think if we are thinking progress in educating people on domestic violence, we have to ask, but what exactly are we teaching people about domestic violence? I think we need to teach far beyond ‘violence is wrong’. Facts don't usually determine human behaviors. It's your emotions, your values, your beliefs, your cognition, that will determine how one acts.

Similarly, when we think about both survivors of violence and perpetrators of violence; on why survivors stay? and why perpetrators continue to hurt?, we have to think as your have alluded, all the psychological determinants of the whole dynamics.
But I shudder, when I think, what sometimes comes, especially for queer individuals is; what is the lesser evil? Its sad to think about how the world is actually responsible for the pain people suffer in their private lives.

There was something interesting, but also disturbing about the compartmentalization of Ibrahim in the story. The violent Ibrahim, and the religious Ibrahim. Or say Ibrahim and his sexuality, and his consistent religious practice by a religion that is homophobic. How does one bridge these kinds of contradictions?

Olakunle: In creating the character of Ibrahim--all of the characters actually--I observed people, because I wanted the characters to be so realistic and alive that you can run into them one day, or find yourself sitting beside them on a park bench, and they will tell you their own story. Religion is a large part of us, and I wanted this to reflect in the character of Ibrahim because, to face the truth, a lot of people carry contradictions about in this present world. They contradict their own selves and then carry out personal battles on the bodies of other people. I wanted Ibrahim to be a representation of the irony of people nowadays, people who are two things all at once, people who leave you unsure of what to do, or how to even go about doing it.

If it was in a straight relationship, perhaps Ahmed might have spoken up earlier, even if he had to "wait", but because it's a gay relationship, one already frowned upon, what then could Ahmed do? It's a clear case of weighing the options that living in a homophobic society gives you: Abuse happens in a straight relationship and only little is done. But this is a gay relationship, an already-abhorred "cohabitation" and you think the society will do something about it? Think again.

Gaamangwe: I totally understand Ahmed's wait, because yes, society is not ready or willing to engage with domestic violence in a gay relationship. Actually, generally society is not willing to engage with violence as long as it's removed from them. If it's not, it will find a way to blame survivor of the violence.

This actually disturbs me; why is society unequipped to deal with violence? Why are we unable to handle other people's traumas? And why do we find it easy to ignore harm done on another, particularly if they fall in the minority group?

Olakunle: This is a question we all should ask ourselves, because a society is not just made up of one person. It is made up of different people who, although are bound by various factors like religion or dressing, have different opinions. And in thinking of the right way to answer this, I sampled opinions of different people. Here are some answers:

A: I think it's sometimes laziness. So when the violence is not done to us, it is easier to ignore than get involved especially when everyone is battling the daily business of living.

B: We are naturally selfish people so once we don't feel it directly, it's easy to "forget" and get carried away with the motions of our own lives and its challenges. We can feel bad somewhat when we hear about it, yes, but when we get into the details of our lives, we shrug off those excesses.

C: Because life is survival of the fittest.

D: Why we cause harm to minorities is due to a variety of things. Centre of it, some argue, is the evolutionary need to preserve the group. So when someone, or a group of persons do something
different and in essence become minorities, the larger group feels threatened by them, believing it puts their collective existence at risk. Why it then becomes easy to harm such minorities is that once they are othered, they can be thought of as sub-human. So they are marked, described as a threat to the collective, then labeled as something other than human. At this point the human fight or flight response can be trusted to take over. You'll easily kill a group of people if you believe they are going to eat your kids, than if you just don't like their face. But find a way to tie their faces to killing your kids and it doesn't matter again what the original intentions are.

As for why we're unable to handle people's trauma, I want to know, are you asking why we're unable to bear witness to pain, or why we are eager to undermine such pain? Again, we are wired to be repulsed by trauma. It's why horror movies sell. It's easier to turn our eyes away from someone being beaten in horror than to go and try to rescue them. It's why we reward bravery. If we were all brave, there'll be no need to reward it. As for being quick to ignore it, it all boils down to empathy, I guess. Again, I'm not sure there's an evolutionary need for empathy beyond protecting members of someone's clan. We're naturally empathetic to our own family, and that, sometimes, makes us quick to turn away from taking on the burden of others lest we utilise resources meant for our people on strangers. This is probably why we do Suffering Olympics. You're in pain? Hey yeah, I was in pain yesterday too. It was worse than what you're going through today.

**Gaamangwe:** Suffering Olympics is absolutely terrible because it makes us invalidate each other's suffering. For your questions, I am asking both; why it's difficult for us to witness other's pain and also our eagerness to undermine other's pain. This brings me to what I am grappling with; how do we actually then learn and relearn witnessing other's trauma? What's necessary, psychologically and evolutionary, for us as a society to learn to put our disagreements and misunderstandings aside, particularly in the face of violence, and actually step up and witness and intervene?

I am distraught because for all those reasons you shared about why we struggle with bearing witness particularly to minorities, they must still be something innate in us, that is moved to help others, to see each other, particularly minorities as human beings. This is the part I am interested in learning and discovering, because we need to step up as a society. Too many of us are hurting, and are being hurt, and we as a society must create spaces that help those who are being hurt, especially minorities.

**Olakunle:** First of all, I think that we should learn the act of collective living. We should know that we all are interconnected in ways that are beyond our understanding, and so should learn how to stand up for one another in difficult times, how to be really active, really doing, and not just sit in the comfort of our homes when issues arise, only posting Facebook status updates, tweets and changing Whatsapp display photos.

We should learn the act of love, too, and of understanding, and we should stop acting God, sitting to apportion judgement and blame. We should know that there are questions that we cannot answer, and we should stop trying to live people’s lives for them or dictate how they should be or act, what they should how they should do it. And we should unlearn our fear of minorities, and re-learn how
to be human, because it all boils down to what we are as humans. Before anything, we are human. And there is no perfection in humanity, honestly.

Gaamangwe: I agree with learning the act of collective living, because we are truly one. I love that. Thank you so much Olakunle for these reflections. They have been shifting for me. Keep writing, keep telling stories.
Julia Hango, better known as JuliART has self funded three successful solo exhibitions to kick start her provocative feminist art career in 2014 in Namibia. JuliART’s digitally created photographs are surreal and thought provoking as they are layered with movement and emotion that give the artworks an exploratory three dimensional space, challenging the notions of sexuality and gender. Her work utilises the power of the camera and the naked human body as a tool to challenge society on issues of gender, bodily autonomy, morality, identity, and, perhaps most importantly, her own life as a nudist. JuliART, as part of a "So Namibia" Collective was invited to show at THAT ART FAIR 2016 in Cape Town, South Africa. She did a solo show that documented different people's perspectives on nudity and being naked in Namibia. They have also been invited to exhibit at the 2016 Art Photo Market in Budapest, Hungary.
This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and the cold, magical winter sunsets in Namibia by Email.

Gaamangwe: Once again, congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does it mean to you to be shortlisted as a photographer and as a human being?

Julia: Well, as a photographer I am grateful to have my work published somewhere where people who are alive today and many moons from now, will be able to experience my experiences through the energy transferred into the images. As a human, I am still very asleep to the reality of this whole thing. I know it’s happening, I know it makes me proud but why? We seem to strive for more and more and once we have it we aim for more. Nevertheless I am beyond grateful, beyond.

Gaamangwe: Yes, it seems the thing of being human is to always strive for more. It’s a very beautiful and strange thing. Your images are powerful. What inspired the energy behind their conceptualize, the capturing and full products?

Julia: My life, my relationship, the movements there that confront us about who we are as individuals and as a unit and the life we choose in this conservative society we live in, here in Namibia.

Gaamangwe: I am very interested to know more about the conservative society in Namibia, in particularly what its energy towards sexuality is. Obviously this is vast, but I am particularly interested in the sexuality dynamics you choose to explore for the anthology. What narratives were you tackling through your images?

Julia: Here in Namibia everyone is extremely prude, perhaps it’s the way we are raised, to sort of be ashamed of our sexuality and acts of pleasure and desire. I have a hard time finding spaces, safe spaces to exhibit my work and if I do it always comes with a lot of public interference. The narratives I am looking at with these works are the exchange and expressions of masculine and feminine energy between these two (society says) different individuals who in this dance/fight become one, forever connected. The works also looks at feeling safe in my own brain, the dark small spaces between us, his energy of acceptance and unconditional love.

Gaamangwe: It’s quite powerful what you did here. How important was it for you to express the feminine energy as black feminine energy and the masculine energy as white masculine energy? What inspired you to explore the connection of these two energies, particularly taking into account the racial narrative of the images?

Julia: This was very important to me because I am a black african woman who fell in love with a white man who I relate to more than anyone else I’ve ever met or loved and that comes with beautiful unfoldings which I have now started documenting and creating around. The energy was inspired by how this man showed me true freedom by letting me be my true self and showing me what unconditional love looks and feels like.
Gaamangwe: I am interested in the creative process of this particular artwork. How easy was it for the models to be comfortable with nudity and intimacy, each other and the whole creative team? And also, how was the process for the photographer?

Julia: The truly magical thing here is that these are self portraits of myself and my partner. This series describes our daily struggles and love for one another. So no acting, just real raw emotions. We were at a transitioning place after we had just gotten our daughter, and him diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis.

Gaamangwe: This is powerful Julia. Thank you for sharing your life and work in this way.
Ayodele Sogunro is a writer, social critic and lawyer. He is the author of *The Wonderful Life of Senator Boniface and other Sorry Tales* and, most recently, the collection of essays: *Everything in Nigeria is Going to Kill You*. His writings have earned references and publication in international and Nigerian media. Ayo Sogunro has experience in human rights law working with the The Initiative for Equal Rights, a sexual and health rights NGO in Nigeria. He is currently undertaking the Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa programme at the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria.
Gaamangwe: Congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does it mean for you to be shortlisted for this particular award?

Ayodele: As a writer, being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award was encouraging to my creative preferences. My entry was an essay. I think African writing prizes should do more to encourage the recognition of creative non-fiction. Stories are told in many ways and we should not confine our literary awards only to the standard models. Case in point: the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature. As a human, I'm just quite glad that queer stories and narratives have found a voice in the African literary scene.

Gaamangwe: I am also quite glad that queer stories and narratives are finding a voice in the African literary scene. It is so important that these narratives are part of the global dialogue, especially right now where we live in a world that wants to insist on one, specific and particular narrative. What drew you to the narrative that you explored in your essay? Why was it important for you to explore this narrative?

Ayodele: That's a question that requires a complicated response detailing the influences of my legal training and education, Western liberal philosophy, the African Ubuntu ideal and the Yoruba concept of Omoluabi. But, the summary answer is that there can be no human progress when one or more parts of humanity try to suppress another part. Conflict is borne out of, amongst other things, a refusal to acknowledge and appreciate diversity. My exploration of the queer narrative is, therefore, inspired by the hope of contributing some enlightenment on the diverse nature of humanity—not just in sexuality, but in all other aspects of existence. This means questioning and testing existing frameworks of social, legal and moral thought and judging them not just by some inherent authority they claim to have, but by their external effect on human solidarity and cooperation.

Gaamangwe: What is the Yoruba concept of Omoluabi? I agree with you Ayo, about the importance of assessing framework not for what they claim but for their full impact on human life. I imagine that the anti-gay law has actually made life for LGBTI communities very difficult to navigate. Recently a Nigerian writer was kidnapped for an essay he wrote about queer rights. The very fact that this law exists made it quite difficult for this situation to be fixed quickly, because reporting to the police would have made the whole situation far worse. So it's quite important to open dialogues about how a law against same sex marriage can unravel and sustain other things (homophobia, lack of legal/police accessibility and just plain violence and restriction of expression).

There isn't an exact, logical reason for this law but it is sustained by deeply-entrenched systems. Which makes it quite difficult to challenge the law. Can the law be challenged and actually be overturned?
Ayodele: The Yoruba concept of Omoluabi (loosely translated as 'the child birthed by the Lord of Good Behaviour) is a philosophical ideology that sets out the ideal of a 'good' human. It requires an individual to form personality attributes among which are having: Inu Rere (goodwill to others), Iwapele (gentle character; tolerance). More on this can be found in academic works by Prof Wande Abimbola and others.

Yes, the anti-gay law has complicated life for LGBTI people in Nigeria, in several many ways. The silver lining is that it has also forced a conversation that most Nigerians would have been unwilling to have four years ago. Socially, this is a good thing as conversation breeds enlightenment even if it has the side effect of more vocal homophobia. Politically, however, the Nigerian democracy can hardly be called a receptive one. Political changes are often triggered by the interests of the political class more than anything else. While a sympathetic court may overturn the law through strategic litigation, the government has been known to ignore court orders if the judgement does not suit its political interests.

Gaamangwe: Yes, the silver lining is quite important because we are now having a dialogue, and this dialogue is actually going beyond the borders of Nigeria, and all across Africa. Hopefully, through this, eventually, this will transform to actual policy amendments. Hopefully, the collective voice can outweigh the interests and power of the political class.

What impact do you imagine and hope your piece will have on both political and social space? Also, what questions/dialogues/narrative/spaces do you hope your work gives birth to?

Ayodele: It would really be thrilling to see policy changes on gender and sexuality in Nigeria. I don't suppose that's way too much to hope for in my lifetime. But, for now, I am looking forward to conversations that are nuanced in the socio-political complexities of Nigeria. Many of the public arguments I've heard on the issue of tackling Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity issues in Nigeria are simplistic: for example, merely focusing on religious dogmatism whereas quite a number of LGB Nigerians I know are equally just as religious as homophobic people. As I try to show in the essay, the issue is complex. Rampant homophobia in Nigeria is tied to the dysfunctional political system, economic classism, and of course, to cultural ignorance caused by the declining quality of education. It would be wonderful if my piece generates further examinations of these aspects.

Gaamangwe: I suppose the focus on religious dogmatism is at the forefront of this dialogue because often times ideologies of sexuality seemed to be perceived from that window glass. Of course, as you said it's far more complex than we realized. It's actually quite overwhelming when you think about the interconnections of 'oppressive' system and how one feeds and sustains the other. For sure, we need further examinations. Do you have any thoughts or ideas about what systems we can start with to untangle this whole mess? Can we possibly discover the core of everything and take that apart?
Ayodele: This, I'm sure has to be the subject of weighty academic dissertations. But, offhand, I would say in the Nigerian context, it is important to educate people on the primacy of human rights as a standard of achieving human dignity. Many Nigerians still conceptualise rights as something that has to be earned through work, education or status. The more people begin to consider human rights as an inherent quality of existence, the easier it is to liberate areas of gender and sexuality.

Gaamangwe: We call that Botho in setswana. Essentially, having a deep sense of another person's humanity. It's so paramount that we highlight this before any systems. Also we are really interconnected. The sooner we learn this the better. Thank you so much Ayo for joining me. This has been an education.
Farah Ahamed is a short fiction writer. Her stories have been published in *The Massachusetts Review, Thresholds, Kwani?, The Missing Slate* and *Out of Print* among others. She was highly commended in the 2016 London Short Story Prize, and joint winner of the inaugural Gerald Kraak Award. She has been nominated for The Caine and The Pushcart prizes. She was shortlisted for the SI Leeds Literary Prize, DNA/Out of Print Award, Sunderland Waterstones Award, Asian Writer Short Story Prize, and Strands International Short Story.
This conversation took place in a green bedroom in the cold sweetspot of Gaborone, Botswana and a hot, muggy, summer's day in London, UK by Email.

Gaamangwe: Congratulations once again for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award and being selected as one of the contributors for the Pride and Prejudice anthology. What does it mean for to be shortlisted as a writer and as a human being for this particular award?

Farah: The Gerald Kraak Award for writing and photographs from Africa on gender, human rights and sexuality comes at a time when more than 34 African governments have repressive laws especially around LGBT rights, where cultural practices such as Female Genital Mutilation deprive women the right of control over their own bodies, and superstition leads to the persecution of people living with albinism. More recently there has been a homophobic backlash against African writers who are LGBT- I'm referring to the Brunel Prize. These are some examples which indicate that societal attitudes towards the negation of basic human rights are deeply entrenched and I believe these will never change unless there are pockets of active resistance—no matter how small and where. The award and this anthology are making an important artistic contribution towards advancing this cause.

Being chosen as the joint-winner of this award came as a great surprise but I am thrilled because it means my story 'Poached Eggs' will get a wider readership and that's very exciting.

Gaamangwe: I absolutely agree on the importance of active resistance at this point in our history. This anthology is so important, every rebellion and defiance work is important. What of was important for you to create as a story?

Farah: In writing fiction it interests me to see how characters respond to the social, political or cultural constraints of their environments and the choices they make whether to conform or resist. Some characters thrive, while others have to resort to subversion.

This story is set in the early days of independent Kenya where citizens were still trying to understand what it meant to be free from colonial rule. But for men and for women the consequences were quite different. For women living within a patriarchal family, the struggle was not yet over.

Gaamangwe: I enjoyed Poached Eggs because it really zoomed in, on how the social and political states of the country affect people on an individual level. The personal is really political. We cannot underststate the impact of patriarchy on women's lives and romantic relationships. That small rebellion is also powerful because revolutions actually start on an individual level, in our homes.
Farah: All interesting stories are about the choices characters make when they are challenged and under pressure. Either they want or don’t want something, which could be either good or bad for them. Or they are denied or constrained by something from their environment or in their personality. Or it could be all of these together. It could be an internal struggle to overcome an aspect of themselves like David in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* or about being caught up in bureaucratic absurdity like Joseph K in Kafka’s *The Trial* or something as simple (and complex) as wanting to be in an equal relationship, like Sophia in Jean Rhys’ *Good morning, Midnight*. These are examples from novellas, but the short story form especially allows the illumination and exploration of a character’s decisive moments. I don’t believe the personal can ever be separated from the political.

**Gaamangwe:** Yes, writing is political. It’s through writing that we meditate on how every single moment of the person relates with the collective reality and histories. What narratives are you interested in exploring with your writings?

Farah: At the moment I am working on two short story collections and a novella. The first is based in East Africa and ‘Poached Eggs’ is one story from that collection. The second is a character led narrative and interlinked. The novella is based in London and the nature and shape of the telling of the story is greatly influenced by Indian classical music.

**Gaamangwe:** That sounds really interesting. How do you hope to contribute to the world dialogue as a creative?

Farah: The short story allows experimentation with language, punctuation, structure as well as narrative and so there is always the challenge of trying to tell a story in a more accurate way and become better at crafting.

**Gaamangwe:** Thank you Farah for joining me in this space. All the best of luck with writing!
Amatesiro Dore is an alumnus of the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop, Fellow of the Ebedi International Writers Residency and Regional Managing Editor (Nigeria) of The Theatre Times. He recently participated in the British Council/International Association of Theatre Critics “Young Critics Programme”, was awarded the Saraba Manuscript (Non-Fiction) Prize, the Reimagined Folktale Contest and is currently shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award.
This conversation took place in the green bedroom in the cold, sweet spot of Gaborone, Botswana, and Madrid, a smokey room with a mainland view, on the third floor of a Lagos hotel, in Yaba, via Email.

Gaamangwe: Congratulations for being shortlisted for the Gerald Kraak Award. What does being shortlisted for this award mean to you?

Amatesiro: Redemption: the first sign of victory, a befitting crown over the phobias and conditions that subdued the advancement of my published works, the reward of my literary labours and the celebration of my creative talents.

“For Men Who Care” is a tale of refusal, the audacity to say no and disagree with anything that questions the humanity of minorities like me. It's an intellectual *Fuck You* to those who challenge, maim and dehumanise the natural urges and stimuli of people who can feel beyond their own majority capacity. I was tired of the timid, sexually-bland and pity-tales about souls like me. So I decided to write narratives of individual power, mental tenacity and fearful courage of people like me.

Getting shortlisted means more people will learn and understand that our days as a timid minority are over. And nothing will stand on our way to unconditional freedom, mutual respect and a seat on every table.

Gaamangwe: I absolutely love this intellectual *Fuck You!* It's about time. Yes, "For Men Who Care" is a tale of refusal, but also so much more. The characters of your tale have a lot to say about what it means to care. To care about being true to oneself, and to care for others truly and sincerely. But also in that caring, they all dared to break all the walls that tried to close them off from their humanity and human rights. What walls were important for you to explore in your tale?

Amatesiro: Once, I was in a room with someone I cared about and I could hear the voice of my father through the walls. However I felt no shame, unlike Adam after eating the forbidden fruit. The walls surrounding my heart was beginning to crumble after that day. Yet, it wasn't until I started documenting my queer experiences and imagination that I began to find courage to walk out of the cage of my upbringing.

During my teenage years, at the arrival of the internet in Nigeria, I would sneak to cyber cafes, sit at the last hidden corner, to read nifty.org stories, the only platform I knew that showcased my type of love. At that time, I was a "born again Christian" yet very curious about the workings of my heart. The only problem with nifty stories is that they never prepared anyone for life as Africans like myself. Most of the narratives promoted toxic homosexuality, low self-esteem and didn't aid my craft as a writer. I wish they were better written, properly edited and intended to be mentally stimulating and not just to jerk off.
I’m writing the sort of queer narratives I love to read, without walls, not even around the bedroom. Though my characters formulate their own opinions, I simply document their words.

Gaamangwe: The characters in "For Men Who Care" are very courageous, but the most courageous of them is you, their writer. It takes so much to allow the voices inside writers to come out as clearly as they are, especially in this very homophobic world. What is the source of your courage? The courage that allowed you to document your queer experiences and imaginations.

Amatesiro: Courage is overrated, doesn't put food on the table; just a natural reaction of a person without hope, without any care for the world or regard for the consequences of their defiance. How do you qualify the courage of an innocent man on death row, who refuses to shed tears or beg the judge, but simply tells his story as he surrenders himself to the firing squad.

Courage is a political word, a label for "activists"; to honour a man for being courageous is medicine after death. But in the real world, courage is your mother confronting twenty assailants, without faith in your testimony, just her innate desire to keep you alive, to keep evil at bay, until morning comes.

Courage is my mother's high blood pressure, the grey hairs that does not represent her age and the firm belief that her "useless" son will make something of his life. Courage is when the chief witness of your accusers testify in your favour, says the truth about your character and continues to love you during your persecution. Let's not talk about courage. It's a bad word in a scary world.

Gaamangwe: I don't know, the poet in me thinks that courage is pretty bad ass. I think it's a Godly thing. And a love thing that goes far beyond reasoning. We can think of it on the other side, but maybe we must insist on thinking of it, for all the ordinary people. I think that we must think of things far beyond their inspirations or sources, but also what the actions of those things mean and create for us. And if we must, we should render new meanings to words. Because we must find a way to survive this scary world. We must find the significance of ourselves in every single act, whether against or for us. But Amatesiro, what do you call what sustains you? What inspires you to keep documenting your experiences, and what makes you care?

Amatesiro: I loved reading as a child and never respected writing as career because my kind stepfather and beloved husband of my mother is a pioneer Nollywood scriptwriter, Itsekiri poet, accomplished playwright, seasoned journalist, respected film and documentary director whose multiple talents and creative hustles didn't provide the luxurious lifestyle my mother deserved.

Secondly, I discovered to my chagrin, during my second year studying law, that the Nigerian legal system wasn't designed to protect the poor, empower the weak and promote justice. As a result, I stopped reading John Grisham and his legal "fantasies". I schooled and dined with the children of the custodians of our legal system. In fact, our entire educational system was designed to favour my classmates, kids from privileged families like my biological father and his associates.
So, as a child from parents habiting different economic spectrum, I enjoyed the luxuries of being my father's son with a car of my own at sixteen, before the legal driving age of eighteen, while my hardworking stepfather could not afford to buy a car of his own.

I'm overly sensitive, one of my many personal weaknesses that favours my art. I would read a story or see something and absorb the pains therein like a sponge. And I enjoyed living in my head, questioning what doesn't concern me and generally unable to mind my own business.

Somehow, my mother made me very aware of hardship as she shared her frustrations with me during my formative years. Every poor woman became my mother and I would always juxtapose her experiences with the peaceful existence of the spouse of my father, mothers of my rich classmates and better marital benefits enjoyed by her sisters.

If I was wiser, at that time, I would have practiced law like my colleagues, utilised the business connections of my father or would have found ways to commercialise my advantage as an early-user of social media in Nigeria. Instead of being a profitable son of my mother, I decided to "follow my dreams" of being a writer, deactivated my social media accounts for five years in order to concentrate on my craft and failed to realise how much my mother needed me to make my own money for myself.

Nowadays, I just want to make my mother happy after all the stress she undergoes as a result of my selfish decision to become a writer.

In Africa, only the privileged can document their experiences. Who wants to read a book when they haven't eaten. So I document my experiences because I've come too far to turn back and my mother finally supported my writing ambitions, last year, after almost seven years of quarrels and disagreements.

Finally, I won at home and she said: "I'll get anything I want". She's my motivation. I need to prove to her that I made the right decision to abandon my legal career. I believe my writing will be more beneficial to her plight and other financially disadvantaged Nigerians than any bloody legal career will ever do. After all, I schooled with the next generation of Nigerian judges and senior advocates and I can't seem to hear their voices when we need them to speak to power, to challenge their parents and make Nigeria a better place for my mother.

Gaamangwe: Your mother is a lucky woman to have a son who cares as you do. However I do not think "following one's dreams" of becoming a writer, should be thought of as selfish. An uncommon path? yes, a difficult path? absolutely. But a purposeful path? yes, absolutely.

I think we all have roles that we ought and have to play for the bigger, collective purpose of humanity. I am thinking of it this simply. Infact, I sensed that this perspective of looking at the world as; this world belongs to all of us, and we have the right to live it anyhow we want, is what the stories of all of your characters—Adey, Emeka and Aliyu—highlighted. They were saying; unlearn self-sacrifice. This is your life, and it belongs to you. Do you.
But of course unlearning is no easy task. What do you think will make it easy to unlearn self-sacrifice, particularly for queer individuals? In reflection; do you personally grapple with self-sacrifice? And self-forgiveness, for the parts of you that others struggle to easily accept?

Amatesiro: I grew up needing Jesus, the lord of self-sacrifice. I needed Jesus to help me stop sucking my thump, my grandparents hated that beloved habit of mine and did everything to make me stop sucking my bandaged, incised and peppered best friend.

I needed Jesus in order to make friends. I attended four different primary schools and five distinct secondary schools across three Nigerian states, shuttling between my parents during their endless custody battles. On Facebook, everybody is my classmate. In reality, I never lived long enough in one home to build friendships to fortify my soul. In primary three, I knelt in the toilet of a new school and asked Jesus to send me a friend. And he sent Dayo, an effeminate friendly bully who protected my stay at Debo Nursery and Primary School.

Then I needed Jesus in order to stop bedwetting. My disgraceful enuresis kept me pious and faithful. After all, only Jesus could take away the shame of bed-wetting in senior secondary school. Miraculously, after almost fourteen years of wetting every bed I slept on, Jesus began to wake me up on dry beds.

A few months before my final secondary school examinations, I broke down and spent the next six months in and out of the most expensive hospitals in Lagos. To the shame of my mother's enemies, I graduated with my classmates and got admitted into the most expensive private university in the country, at that time, when my fifteen year old mates were running errands for their parents.

However, my Christian upbringing said I shouldn't masturbate and I wasn't permitted to crush on the sexy guys loved by all the girls. Actually, by virtue of paternal wealth and maternal genes, I was one of the finest boys in every class I ever attended. As a Jesus boy, I wasn't permitted to fornicate. I wasn't permitted to openly fall in love with the kind of people I actually loved.

I was the undergraduate who "sowed" his car. As in, I gave one of the cars my father bought for me to Jesus, to his church and for his Pastor to convert into cash for the promotion of the Christian gospel. Brothers and sisters, I was contributing all my money to Jesus when my mother could barely afford to survive, when my siblings from her womb were sent out of school for failing to pay tuition as at when due.

In Nigeria, Jesus can never be satisfied. You keep paying and servicing your relationship with him so that your father doesn't die suddenly like some of the parents of your classmates. I was in a very abusive relationship with Christ which ended abruptly when his church refused to give me my car papers, permit me to graduate with my peers and enjoy some form of social activities during my final year in university.

The break up was scandalous, widely-discussed and life changing. Suddenly, all the girls I used to preach to began to fall in love with me. And the boys, oh the boys, the things boys can do and say
for love. I couldn't believe guys were capable of such expressions. Here is this cold-hearted
modafucker, sexier than the devil, having slept with all the girls, holding your hands in the dark and
sharing his deepest fears with you. It was the most emotional shit in the world. It wasn't love but
there was a deep connection. Like David and Jonathan.

After Christ, I discovered that my heart was capable of such endless stream of affections, unbridled
capabilities and I could perform wonders on the human body. The miracles I performed on the bed
left many calling back but I wasn't interested in building a life with them, Jesus said no, my friends
would be disgusted and the comments of society: blood of Jesus!

I grew into my awesomeness. I danced in and out of love with Christ, trying to find a balance and
negotiate our terms of engagement. After a while, I discovered Jesus wasn't working for me. So I
moved on and lived as I pleased.

Recently, based on the state of my heart and the works of my hands, my conversations with Christ
has become respectful, humane and considerate. I refuse to apologise for the genuine affections of
my heart. In fact, I take offence at any doctrine that belittles my existence or the way I love. So, let's
just say I have become my first priority. I have died and resurrected to live life on my own terms.

Nowadays, my conversations with God are very personal, without any middleman and I will never
listen to anything that disagrees with my personal convictions. I am righteousness. I am holy. And I
am the word of God unto myself.

Gaamangwe: This is so powerful Amatesiro. I am for this deep understanding and appraisal
of the validity of all of our own experiences. I have always struggled with modern religion
for this very fact, that it insists that there is only one way of life, and one right truth. It leaves
far too little for the majority of humans to truly live their lives without shame and crippling
fear. Much of homophobia is deeply steeped in religious beliefs that insists on invalidating
people's humanity. I do wonder, coming from such an intense religious beliefs, how have
you integrated what you hold to be your spirituality into the experience of your sexuality?

Amatesiro: I first began to explore this idea, in print, during an anonymous interview with Saratu
Abiola, the journalist and celebrity daughter of the late MKO Abiola, Nigerian billionaire and winner
of the annulled June 12, 1993 Nigerian Presidential Election. This virile Yoruba business magnate,
liberal Muslim and husband of intellectual and ambitious women would have been our first
cosmopolitan Head of State. He was a man who navigated his own destiny, from an impoverished
background to academic excellence at home and abroad, performing white collar jobs alongside
running a multi-faceted business empire, courting the military and political class to the point of
performing his own personal political ambitions. He was a man who metamorphosed with the times,
navigating his personal faith to satiate his natural urges for women, challenging the status quo at
home and abroad. Here is a man who demanded reparation from the West in 1992. Imagine his
amazing audacity. It's amazing the things we can learn from men who are different from us, of a
different persuasion and orientation.
Back to the point: I discussed with Saratu as though I was talking to MKO Abiola. He seemed like my kind of person, an accommodating Yoruba man who will not allow religion blind his eyes. No wonder Yorubas make amazing Muslims. Islam is a religion for the intelligent. Christianity permits a believer to leave his brain outside the church. However, the most dangerous man in the world is a dumb Muslim. Ignorance and Islam is like oil on water. The fanatics will set all of us on fire. But a dumb Christian can only harm himself. In fact, Christianity encourages stupidity, the most successful churches are congregations of sheep following one man, their Pastor, who embodies Christ or whatever he believes to be the truth.

Christianity gives room for multiple interpretations depending on the Preacher, the school of thought or the dominant narrative. So if a bunch of homophobes gather together to compile several Christian writings and call it the Bible...that's what it is to all those who believe and agree with them. Hence the fervent need for evangelism and "soul winning" in Christianity. There's a need to convince people to accept and join their own school of thought. That is why there can never and will never be a universal Church. That's too much power for one man, the Pope of the Catholics, majority of which were Italians in recent past. Not forgetting the defiant Russian Orthodox Church. And the events that led to the "heretical" founding of the German Lutheran Church and the English Anglican Communion.

However, there's just one Islam and different levels of intelligent practitioners. Aside from the political, regional and tribal sects...like why would you think the heirs of the great Persians intellectuals of the past and the arrogant children of the up-and-coming Arabs will agree on the same version of Islam. The disagreements in Islam are intellectual and political. The variants in Christianity are based on the moods and spirits of the worshipers.

Of all the Nigerian cultures, the Yorubas are the most spiritually fluid set of people. True Igbo culture has no room for foreign ideas. Igbo metaphysics is set on unshakable principles of spiritual democracy, personal gods and communal superstitions. The Hausas were some of the most liberal societies in this part of the world before the Fulani-led Islamic jihad. Independent Hausa-city states, some were led by women and hosted queer communities, just like in Arabia before the great Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Unto His Name, conquered Medina and environs, and stripped the desert of sin and convinced his followers to flush barrels of indigenous Alcohol down the streets of Arabia like the blood of their unbelievers.

Jesus was the son of a Carpenter, a humble man of royal stock with power to perform miracles and bestow on you his rights and privileges in heaven. The Prophet, Peace Be Unto His Name, was an ambitious, intelligent and gifted orphan who interacted with God in the mountains and returned with a book, despite never having received any form of formal Arabic education like other intellectuals of his time. The Prophet documented his thoughts in precepts, hadiths and laws at a time when formal education had taken root in the world, when the Catholic Church was already a full-fledged spiritual and political enterprise. Imagine Scientology taking over the minds and souls of half the world population in a thousand years. The rise of the Prophet occurred when the record keeping system of the world had gone beyond oral transmission. Imagine starting a brand-new religion during an age of Twitter and Facebook about a thousand years ago.
As a result, Islam only functions best in the mind of intelligent people. It was written and transmitted by reading and reciting. To be a Christian, the heart only needs to believe while the mouth confesses the son-ship and God-ship of Christ. You don't necessarily have to read the Bible to be a Christian but you must read and recite the Quran to be a true Muslim. Hence the prayers, five times a day. The best Christians are the dumb ones, the ones who know very little about the history of the Church and the Bible, just looking up to Jesus, the author and finisher of their faith.

This is what I believe: that religion is one of the colours of life, a secondary colour of human existence, like some men are White and some men are Black. Art is a colour. Spirits are the highest colours. I believe in the spirit of a man. The greatest artists are men who have learnt how to mix colours. If you mix the spirit of a man and art it begets religion. If you mix spirits and science it begets magic, the big bang, shit actually happens. Magic is communal. Religion is personal. Magic requires consent. It is similar to miracles which are just the sparks generated from the clashes of your spirit and the circumstances of life.

For example: this has been my life after Christ, after I stopped praying to the Jesus in the Pastor, but to myself, my recreated human spirit that I have fashioned after my own thought processes, beliefs and the boundaries of my imaginations. As an artist, I have learnt to mix the colours of life to suit my taste and personal journey. A true Igbo man will not consult my chi if he decides to embark on a journey. He will consult his own chi. A Yoruba man will flow with the river. The real Hausa man will congregate together, according to mutual tastes and emotions, while also encouraging differences as a celebration of life.

Purposely, the three major characters in "For Men Who Care" originated from the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria: a gay Yoruba Demon, a self-made Igbo man seeking to settle down, and a fluid Hausa person.

We must question every shade of life. The injustices of every religion must fade away. Just a few centuries ago, White Christianity celebrated and propagated slavery. Then it evolved into colonialism. Now it's just plain American-Christian imperialism. At least, Islam has moved beyond the Jihad and very soon terrorism will fade away.

As a man of faith, I believe Nigeria will evolve, that the inhuman portions of our religions will pass away. Homophobia is a failure of imagination. That a man can love and accept to be with another man is beyond the mental capability of some ignorant folks. And the custodians of current global religions are simply unwilling, unmotivated and uneducated about the beautiful lives of individual minorities. We must not all be White or Black, some of us can love a man and we have been loving men before the advent of your religion, irrespective of the creation story propagated by your holy books.

The history of the Bible is approximately five thousand years or thereabout. While the world has existed for millions of years. The Bible and the Quran are products of the personal history and cultures of the heirs of Abraham, a middle-eastern folklore hero. How does that affect the spiritual histories of Africans and non-middle-eastern believers. I don't understand why the world is almost divided into supporters of the Muslim middle-east and their Judeo-Christian neighbours.
When my Itsekiri people and our Ijaw neighbours were killing each other over Warri, our battles remained in Warri. The Jerusalem wars and arguments should remain in Jerusalem. The world is not divided into Muslims and Christians. Some of us, no matter how few, have and must be free to practice our own private beliefs.

Thanks to my spirit and private faith, I love myself and I accept the validity of my love and affections. Any other opinion is inconsequential to my existence.

You must find ways to navigate your faith, art, self, spirit and sexuality. Nobody has the right to define the private activities of a private body even in a public space. Religion must give way to humanity. The lesser must remain within the control of the greater. My humanity trumps your spirituality and religious practices. If your Bible or Quran challenges my humanity, that's your own bucket of paint, you should not affect me. Your private colours should not affect or compromise the colours of my life. The rainbow flag represents our beautiful and diverse human conditions and imaginations, our freedom to shine as equals and fellow humans.

Everyone must find their own colours and mix it with the right spirits and the result is your own personal religion.

I demand consent as a prerogative for religious beliefs. Irrespective of the religious beliefs of their parents, everyone must be given the right to question, challenge and transform their religious beliefs.

I worship myself. I'm the God of myself, fashioned after my private tastes and idiosyncrasies. I refuse to live by a two thousand year old doctrine formulated by a man who didn't have a Facebook account neither was Twitter invented during his time. I'm the one here and I'll live according to the religious rules that suits my soul.

Last-last, every man must find their own religion.

Gaamangwe: Oh what an education! What a truth, what a validity and what a way of life that is purely based on individual value fulfillment. I am in awe of your spirit and your truth. Thank you so much for this insightful dialogue, and for the work you have created for this anthology. Stay well, stay free.