

# In conversation: "A party in the footnotes"

## Juliane Okot Bitek and Jenny Penberthy

*In the early 1980s when I was exploring dissertation possibilities, I researched poetry experiments in post-colonial Africa. A thrilling discovery was the work of Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek. In his own English translation, the book length poem Song of Lawino was a fusion of traditional song and free verse. In its form and its social critique, it was a radical work. For the past few years, I've been aware of poet Juliane Okot Bitek's presence in Vancouver and yet that missing p' got in the way of the imaginative leap from Kampala to Vancouver. When I emptied my Capilano University office book shelves into the People's Co-op Bookstore, it was Rolf Maurer who told me that he'd passed my Heinemann African Writers Series copy of Song of Lawino on to Juliane, daughter of the iconic poet. I reeled. —JP*

**Jenny Penberthy:** You were born in Kenya where your parents were living in exile from Uganda. Your father was a widely renowned and revered poet, a professor at Makerere University in Kampala—a cultural icon. His opposition to the regime of Milton Obote made him a target for violence and he and the family were forced to flee. Can you talk about your experience of growing up in Nairobi? Did the family feel safe exiled in close proximity to Uganda? Were you aware of your father's prominence while you lived in Nairobi?

**Juliane Okot Bitek:** I wasn't aware of my father's fame or notoriety—none of us were as kids, I think. Our dad and mom were just dad and mom. We lived in a middle-class neighbourhood, played with kids along our street, went to school, had fights amongst ourselves, made friends, had birthday parties... None of it was remarkable, not while we lived it.

**JP:** Was yours clearly a literary household?

**JOB:** I remember that we had loads of books in the house. I seem to remember books on a shelf in the living room, double sided, like in the library, but there are no pictures for me to confirm whether or not that's a figment of my imagination.



**JP:** Describe the books you grew up among.

**JOB:** My own kid books that I can remember? I grew up on the Enid Blyton series—*The Famous Five* and *Secret Seven* and so on. I also remember later, when we lived in Uganda, devouring the Moses series that were written by Ugandan writer Barbara Kimenye. From my parent's collection of books, I clearly remember seeing Ezra Pound's *Collected Poems* but not ever reading it. I remember the Jerusalem Bible, a huge book.

**JP:** Reading about the Jerusalem Bible, I see that one of the principal translators was Tolkien.

**JOB:** I totally had no idea that Tolkien had anything to do with it, but I can appreciate that even more now! I read

it from cover to cover like a series of stories and this impressed my dad very much. I didn't understand why because at the time they really did read like stories but I suppose I had no capacity to question what I was reading then.

**JP:** Did any of the books remain important to you?

**JOB:** The Bible remains an important text for me because I can appreciate its power through time. I don't read it much anymore, except as a reference, and I still have my high school copy of the King James version. I remain stunned at the impact of this book as it informs and misinforms the construction of western culture.

**JP:** I was also thinking of your account of reading H. Rider Haggard's popular novel *She*.

**JOB:** Oh my goodness, I had a moment reading that book as a girl that I wouldn't find language for until I read Fanon decades later. In that novel, a couple of British explorers in Africa (god) confront a woman Ayesha who has been alive from before the time of Christ. Fanon, and later Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, taught me about the split I experienced when, having associated with the protagonists, I was devastated by what happened to Ayesha, the character for whom the book is titled. Later still, I've come to understand that *misogynoir*, the term for the hatred of Black women, is clearly evident in the stories that we grew up with, the ones in which we had to imagine ourselves as (and relate to) the enactors of this violence. Today, I read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as the colonial endeavour which depended on the innocence myth of the white woman, and I can trace it back to *She* and forward to TV series and films where, as we used to joke/not joke, they kill the Black people first, or that murdered women are the never-ending plot for many seasons. There is still an expectation that we the audience don't associate with the racialized or the women (or the racialized women) in film.

**JP:** How conscious were you of the colonial past as you lived in post-independence Nairobi and Kampala?

**JOB:** I was not conscious of any kind of colonial past, why should we have been? We were living now, as others were, and in those days, especially in Kampala, there were other pressing issues to think about beyond the relationship with Britain. It was a time that was fraught with political instability—there were several governments overthrown between 1980 when we first returned to Uganda and 1988 when I left to go to the US—at least 5 government take-overs and only one was through elections (that were also contested). There were economic upheavals, insecurity and general lawlessness—there was no time or space for thinking of a colonial past, I don't think. That's not to say that others were not thinking about that...

**JP:** Maybe I should be asking when you began to register the legacy of colonialism?

**JOB:** I began to appreciate the legacy of colonialism when I came to Canada. Before that, I thought about colonialism as an era from the past and I understood post-independence as a long upheaval but I thought it was about us Africans sorting ourselves out. We learned African history in school and we heard our parents debate African culture, language, dress, food, history, music, politics... Colonialism always sounded like something long gone.

**JP:** Your poem “Gauntlet” registers the craven obeisance of your high school teachers towards Princess Anne when she visited.

**JOB:** This one is another example of insight that came decades after the event. I remember at the time I was thinking about how it was that our white teachers also had the tradition of kneeling for important people, something which was completely absent from our experience of them. It had always seemed as though only God was worthy of a knee. I know different now.

**JP:** Were you raised speaking English or Acholi or Swahili? Has your experience of African languages altered your relation to English? Or perhaps I should say has your experience of Africa changed your relation to English—a very different question! I think of the lines, “first we’ll take English apart/word by inept word” (*Sublime: Lost Words* 5).

**JOB:** Then we take Berlin! From Leonard Cohen is what I was thinking about when I wrote that. We were brought up inside many languages. We spoke English, Swahili, Luo and when we went to Uganda, we picked up some Luganda as well. Luo is the language of the Acholi but also the language of the Luo people in Kenya. We spoke both but arguably one better than the other.

My relationship to English is more complicated now as I understand it to be more than just a tool of communication. As I read more widely, and become more exposed to people who live and work outside English, I’m deeply aware of how implicated we are as writers who work solely in English, in perpetuating its power base in world-making. I’m much more hesitant to translate terms into English in my writing now.

**JP:** Can you offer an example?

**JOB:** From my *100 Days*, the last poem, “Day 1,” is in Luo. I chose not to translate the poem into English because I know that it can still be appreciated as a page poem through the apparent repetition and it can be sounded out, etc. For anyone who can read Luo, there is an added level of meaning and that’s my way to gesture towards the long war in Acholi from 1986 to 2007.

**JP:** You were young when your father died in 1982. Even so, has he been an important influence for you? I gather from your interview two years ago with *Short Story Day Africa* that you were re-reading his book *Horn of My Love*.

**JOB:** I miss my father sorely. Even though I’m still discovering him as a writer and thinker, I can’t imagine how different my life might have been if I had a father as an adult woman.

That said, I am fortunate to have my mother's steady hand with me. I read my father (among others) to discover and to learn about the Acholi tradition but I also read him to pick his brain on the legacy of colonialism that we still live with today.

**JP:** Your father wrote *Song of Lawino* first in Acholi or should I say Luo?

**JOB:** Technically, I understand the language to be called Luo but it's also true to say Acholi which is the name of the people, the culture and the homeland (that is sometimes called Acholiland).

**JP:** He wrote the original in rhymed couplets and then translated it into English in free verse in 1966. Have you read the poem in Acholi-Luo before? As your father noted, his translation "clipped a bit of the eagle's wings and rendered the sharp edges of the warrior's sword rusty and blunt, and also murdered rhythm and rhyme."

**JOB:** No, I haven't read the Luo version because my language skills are not good enough to appreciate the work at the level of poetry. I do have a copy at home, though. A quick visual check will tell you for sure that there is a lot of rhyme but not always couplets.

**JP:** Free verse and its rhythms are clearly important for you. The East African Song School inaugurated by your father's poem *Song of Lawino* draws

on traditional oral forms that locate a central role for song. I notice that the text on the front flap of *100 Days* mentions the influence on the poems of Anglican hymns, African American Spirituals, spoken word, and hip hop. Is song a conscious priority for you?

**JOB:** Until you asked this question, it was a resounding no. I've been reflecting on that and it seems to me that there is a lot of poetry that is presented as song. I'm thinking about Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," Langston Hughes' "I, Too, Sing America," the Song of Solomon, songs of *Lawino*, *Ocol*, *Malaya*, *Prisoner*, "Soldier," *The Song of Hiawatha*. And of course, there's also Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* that's a novel. Genres have always been difficult as a way to contain my thinking so when I was thinking about the influence on my writing, I wasn't thinking of them as forms. For instance, I was thinking about the Anglican hymns, some of which are referenced in *100 Days*, as prayer, but also lyrics that can be read as damning in the context of mass violence. For African American Spirituals (especially the ones we were taught as kids), as lyrics that were double edged—they were political songs of freedom even though they sounded like praise songs to a Christian god. For spoken word and hip hop, I'm continuously inspired by how syncopation and stress can work to focus attention in a poem.

**JP:** Your sister Jane is a writer in the song school too. Her 1994 book-length poem *Song of Farewell* focuses on the loss of loved ones to war. She dedicates the poem, “To the memory of Dad / Late Prof Okot p’Bitek/Who left with me/An iota of his Poetry.” How are you next generation Okot Biteks received in East Africa?

**JOB:** Better to go next next gen. I haven’t lived in East Africa in thirty years and many of Okot Bitek’s grandchildren are now adult. I’m excited about them and it’s lovely to see my dad’s enduring self carried through. For example, both my son and Jane’s son are singers. Both, I’m certain, inherited my dad’s love of music and song.

**JP:** Your dissertation focuses on memory and its erasure in the context of the almost forgotten 1979 sinking of a ship in Lake Victoria, in which many Ugandan exiles died. As I understand, your research aims not to uncover secrets so much as document absences, erasures, redactions in the archives—a forensics of sorts. You’ve also said that the dissertation is in part a conversation with your father. Can you talk about the parallel scholarly and creative work you’re engaged in?

**JOB:** I’m going to stick with the *parallel* as a place of much tension for me. As part of my dissertation I’m working on a collaboration of sorts with

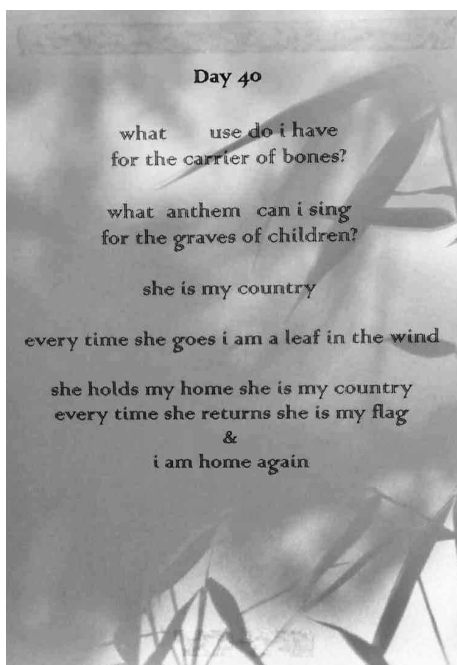
my father who had started to write *Song of Soldier* that I will complete as *Songs of Soldiers*. The parallel indicates to me that the creative and the scholarly can ride alongside each other, just like in that last image of the Indian and the British horse riders in *A Passage to India*—never the twain shall meet and all of that. This keeps me up at night, for real. But I’m doing my best, jumping from one to the other, trying to stay cool about that distance and sometimes pretending that the creative is as scholarly and that the scholarly needn’t remain stuffy and boring.

**JP:** Could you tell us a bit more about the dissertation, about your research interest in how citizenship is impacted by social forgetting?

**JOB:** In my dissertation, I’m thinking about what it means that we forget in the context of constant memorialization. We’re surrounded by cenotaphs, street names, statues, songs, historical texts, the archives, the language we use and sometimes even the names of our own children, but then we have hardly any ready recollection about an event as awful as the drowning of three hundred people. In my dissertation, I’m making it my business to add the memory of the men who lost their lives in a ship on Lake Victoria in 1979. I’m also questioning the political work of forgetting and noting the consequences of that.



JP: Memory is the critical preoccupation of your work. *100 Days* registers the official gestures towards remembering, the consequences of the failure to remember, the trauma of remembering, and many other variants on remembering. *100 Days* itself documents an extraordinary and sustained remembering. I think of Dionne Brand's "sitting in a room



with history" (*A Map to the Door of No Return*). You bear witness for one hundred days. The poems are striking for their restraint, their hushed quiet, their intimacy, and their weariness, all in the face of genocide. You assemble

your own inventories, not of atrocities but powerfully and movingly of daily details. Could you talk about any of this?

JOB: I wanted to think about the business of living and staying alive during before and especially now, decades afterwards. I was thinking about the relationship between survival and hauntedness and how ghosts, Avery Gordon reminds us, are a sign, a call to attention in *Ghostly Matters*. I was listening for voices that might help me imagine what it was to be alive two decades after the 1994 Rwanda Genocide, this year marking 25. But I remember and think about those who have their own private and other public anniversaries. I always think about my own homeland as a post-war society and I have to honor what that means, too.

JP: I've been thinking about the extraordinary courage it takes to write the unspeakable and I recall your account of role played by "listening." Could you explain?

JOB: I don't know about courage in doing this work.

JP: Julie, to look atrocity in the face takes extraordinary courage!

JOB: My idea about listening is maybe keen awareness, maybe? I wrote *100 Days* as a public project, on social media and for that summer, I was always on,

always looking for what I could glean from anywhere that might help me articulate what it meant to remember such a huge event. Everything seemed to speak to me. Stones, just by their stillness, taught me about silent witness; early morning breezes reminded me about the sweetness and beauty of nature which can only be in reflection, not in the moment. It was a way to imagine a time in the past while remaining grounded in the present. Does this work as an explanation of a method?

**JP:** Entirely! It reminds me of composer Pauline Oliveros and her method of “deep listening.” One of her scores reads, “Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.” I think you’re describing a deep and embodied attentiveness to that world.

**JOB:** Yes, also listening for what else comes through. Sometimes they’re catch phrases, like a recent one which emerged in form of a question that seemed to be addressed to me: “Are you empire?” That phrase stayed with me until I wrote it out as a poem, and then it dissipated.

**JP:** I see the constraint of the single day throughout your work. The day by day of *100 Days* but a similar reference to days of the week that occurs among more recent poems, for instance, “Tuesdays like Fridays, Joe said.” Is *165 New Poems: The Mundane, Sublime*

*& Fantastical* another work in progress that will have an online presence before a print existence? Are there 165 new poems already written waiting to be released?

**JOB:** Someday, I’d love to have all of *The Mundane, Sublime & Fantastical* between the same covers. Right now, I have published the *Sublime* with The Elephants and the *Fantastical* will be the *Gauntlet* series by Nomados. I’m working on the *Mundane* as the Writer-in-Residence at Capilano University this spring, although some of it already exists on my website.

**JP:** And I see that *Sublime: Lost Words* is available online as a free e-book. Is there a documentarian impulse behind the poems that attend to days of the week? I sense a daily discipline but also a commitment to dailiness and the quotidian.

**JOB:** Documentarian sounds good but really, I like the sound of Tuesdays, I really do. As a kid, Thursdays was my favourite day of the week, I can’t explain why. Maybe it was/is a kid thing. Daily discipline would also be really good. I think about poetry every day, but I can’t say I write it every day. A discipline might also require writing in notebooks and maybe computers, rather than scraps of paper which are not always kept away in a safe or accessible place. Sigh.

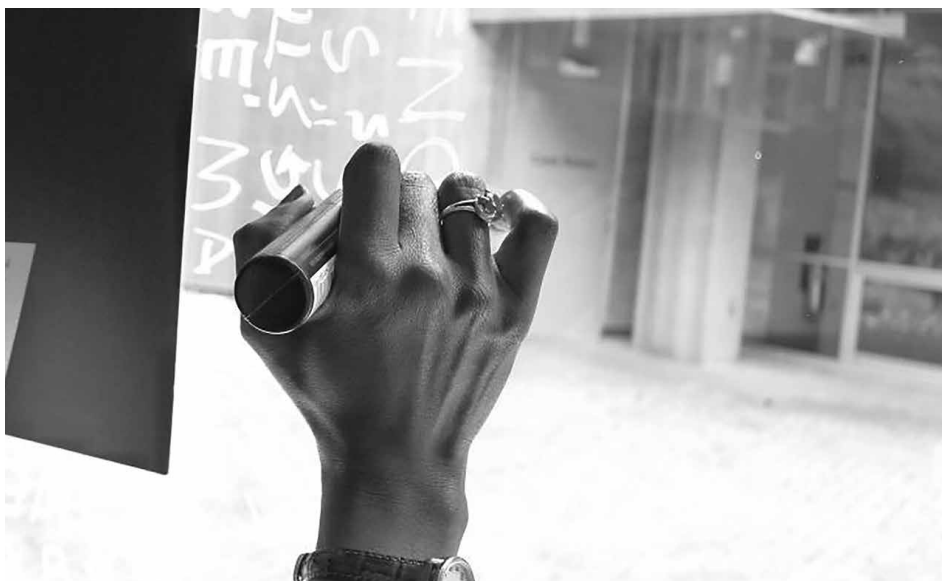


**JP:** Can you talk about the placement of “Gauntlet”—the title poem of your upcoming Nomados chapbook *Gauntlet*—in the marginal space assigned to the footnote? You’ve referred to the poem as, “A journey to reclaim the footnotes as a space for joy, beauty, and free expression.”

**JOB:** I love this series of poems because they work as joy poems, poems about reclamation and possibility. I’m calling them mullet poems—there’s a poem upfront for sure but the party is in the footnotes. I wanted to play with footnotes as the space for creativity, to remove the authority and sombre nature of its history and present. I want the reader to look straight into the footnotes, without having to spend much time in the body of the poem.

**JP:** On your website you have a page about your first return to Uganda in January 2015. You anticipate being your “homeself” in Uganda:

I’m parsing out my different selves based on the different places I’ve called home in decades past. My friend sends me a text this morning, something about being a stranger in a familiar world. As a person born in exile, the notion of country of one’s birth has never meant much to me, even though I get the idea of clinging to the country of one’s identity and there’s nowhere that informs my sense of who I am than that country from which my parents were exiled when I was born. It’s been a long time and I’ve lived in many places. No place has housed my sense of self the way I remember. I’ve become many selves, all contributing to a complicated person.



**JOB:** I've thought about this page sometimes and I have visited Uganda again since then and hope to continue to return. First time is first time. Second time, one returns wearing a film of the familiar that one left with the last time. Now I know that I will still stick out because I haven't learned the social codes—I'm the one taking motorcycle taxis in Kampala when hardly any of my folks were, I'm the one who wears my hair in locs and therefore the nickname *Rasta* when I'm in Uganda. I'm the one who doesn't have an array of gorgeous African dresses, therefore more likely to be dressed casually, which is not really a thing for a middle-aged woman like me. I don't have the dignity and the bearing that a woman like me should have. My local language abilities are passé; I use terms that folks haven't used in a long time. So every which way, I stick out.

**JP:** I've been trying to articulate a question or observation that gets at what I've felt to be your established place in the Vancouver poetry community and your comfortable positioning of your poetry within an African context. Your assurance that your Canadian audience will travel with you to that unfamiliar geography and politics. I can see it as

an assertion of your African identity—as you said at the Black History Month event at the VPL last week, “My Africanness is the most integral part of my identity.” I so much enjoy your generous sharing of that identity. But I also realize that writing about being in Vancouver poses the massive challenge of how to position yourself here in language—here in a very different country but one that has been your physical home for 30 years.

**JOB:** I've spent far too much time thinking about what it means to settle, be settled, unsettled, unlanded/landed (as an immigrant and then as a citizen)—what I can depend on, all the time, is my sense of being African. I can also, mostly, depend on folks to identify me as African. Most of what I write about is located on and informed by the African context although I have recently come to the realization that even that writing is dependent on my having been away for so long, and from writing from here, in this place. So, not so much assurance to a Canadian readership but some confidence in knowing what it means for me to be able to grasp onto an aspect of my identity that is non-negotiable and from where I write the world.