The Corrymeela Podcast - Season 2

Thanks so much for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. You might like to discuss the episode and the accompanying questions with friends, family, or a discussion group, or just use them for your own writing and reflection.

If you're part of a group, be mindful and considerate of one another's willingness to engage in the discussion - leave space for people to keep their reflections to themselves if they want to. You might also want to agree on some general principles to stick to, like: everybody's invited to speak once before anyone speaks twice, and: try to assume that everybody is speaking with good intent.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness among you.

You might like to choose one or two of the Very Short Story questions that we like to put to guests at the end of each episode. Your answers to these can be one sentence long, or a few. Belongings are plural, as are identities and nationalities. So feel free to respond to these story prompts in a way that reflects your own story.

- What's something important that you've changed your mind about?
- Are there books, poems, films, albums, works of art, etc that you've turned to again and again?
- Tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you.
- Tell us about a time when you felt foreign.
- Is there a very short story you can tell us about a time when you said something that surprised you?
- Has anyone ever said that you were disloyal to one of your cultures or identities? Why?

Season 2, Episode 9. Juliane Okot Bitek

reflection questions & episode transcript

1. How easy do you find it to name a particular place (or places) as 'home'. Have you ever been surprised by a feeling of being at home?

2. What do you make of the idea of language as a marker of belonging? Does/do the language (or languages) that you speak contribute to your own sense of identity?

3. Juliane talks about peace being more important in Acholi culture than justice. What do you make of that? What might be the possibilities/ limitations of that approach?

4. 'Thinking about the Rwandan genocide, most of what we knew and talked about and reflected on was the terrible details about what happened in those 100 days. But I wanted to think about everyday people…what might they sound like?' How easily can you bring to mind some of the images of major crises/ places of conflict/ disaster zones of the recent years? In the context of instant news and the immediate sharing of content on social media, do you think we strike a balance between acknowledging atrocity and human suffering, and recognising the humanity and normality of those affected?

Juliane Okot Bitek is a poet. Her *100 Days* (University of Alberta Press, 2016) was nominated for several writing prizes including the 2017 BC Book Prize, the Pat Lowther Award, the 2017 Alberta Book Awards and the 2017 Canadian Authors Award for Poetry. It won the 2017 IndieFab Book of the Year Award for poetry and the 2017 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry. Her second collection, *A is for Acholi* (Wolsak and Wynn, 2022), was shortlisted for the 2023 Pat Lowther Memorial Award and is a finalist for the 2023 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize, and the 2023 Jim Deva Prize for Writing that Provokes. Her most recent collection of poetry *Song & Dread* (2023) is published by Talonbooks under the name Otoniya J. Okot Bitek. She is an assistant professor of Black Studies, joint appointed in English and Gender Studies at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: exploring stories and ideas about conflict, peace, theology, and art.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is poet, writer, and academic, Juliane Okot Bitek. Juliane has published essays and articles, creative nonfiction, and four collections of poetry. She's assistant professor of English, Gender Studies, and Black Studies in Canada at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Juliane, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Thank you, Pádraig. It's good to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
It's good to be here. You and I know each other as friends and collaborating with each other, and so it's a great joy to be in conversation with you now about the expanse of your work and the insight of your, of your life and your attention to the work in your life, and I wanted to start off by asking you a question to which I have no idea of the answer, which is: is there a particular friendship or experience in childhood, however small, that you look to and think that's been very influential for me in my adult life?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Well um, maybe I wasn't very small, but a friendship that I've carried along in my head for decades now is one that I had with a woman - or now she's a woman - Phoebe. And our dads were friends, but we didn't know that when, when we were friends. And I absolutely loved this woman, and, when we were girls, I absolutely loved her. And, er, what I carry is a story about one day- we were in boarding school, first of all, I should say that… One day, she said she was going to have a nap, and she was going to go time travelling. And so she wanted me to sit by her bed, just in case someone came in the room, and then she wouldn't be back in her body. And I sat there terrified, terrified, hoping that nobody would come in, and nobody did. And I still think about how I was just watching for her to come back, waiting for her to come back. Um, yeah, so that's my memory of childhood that I want to talk about!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
What would you say, what's the influence of that on your adult life?!

Juliane Okot Bitek:
I think probably what carries through is my, often my inability to tell the difference between something that's fiction and something that's not fiction. So the terror of that moment was real, while I was waiting. It didn't matter whether or not I believed that she was going to come back. And I often get lost in a story in the same way.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And I know - and we'll talk about this later on - I know that for you the question of what truth is, and how you work with truth in historical stories, as well as in poetry and fiction, that you don't like to think that truth belongs to one and not the other, but we'll come to that in a while; at the moment I'm just currently associating that I had a friend when I was younger, who told me he was from a different planet, and I totally believed him. But that was more about being a gullible five-year-old than anything else!

Juliane Okot Bitek:
I was in high school so maybe your friend and my friend were- came from the same place!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
He told me he came from the planet of grass: it was just a big planet covered in grass. Yeah, there we are. Yeah. You can check with Phoebe if you're in touch with her. I want to kind of start off with you talking about some history and family and then move into questions to do with home and truth and justice. But, like you come from a family of literature and language and story- your mother was a storyteller and your father was a writer. Would you say a little bit about your family?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Well my mother is still a storyteller. I just came back from Vancouver on Sunday. And while I was there, my mum told me so many stories about my family, that I had no idea about, fascinating stories, and she'd move from story to story to story and I had no time to breathe, no time to reflect, no time to think, no time to record; I was thinking, what is, what is

happening? How, how could I have not known all of this? Anyway, she's still a storyteller. My father was a writer, and a poet, erm, and he died in 1982. And he credited his mother for inspiring his writing and thinking. And she was a, she composed songs and she, she was a dancer, too. So the business of storytelling and, you know, creativity runs in my family.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. And Acholi is a word that we're going to hear a lot in conversation with you; could you locate Acholi language but also Acholi homeland within Uganda for us.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Sure, Acholi are a people who are found in- whose homeland is in Northern Uganda and what's now South Sudan. And it's divided by the northern border of Uganda. We're a Luo-speaking people, and er, quite a small population compared to the rest of the country. I don't think there are three million Ugandans- I mean, three million Acholi people from a country that's 30-something million. So it's, it's a very small minority of people.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. And Uganda has many languages, but Acholi is an important one, and certainly you pay a lot of attention to it in speaking about Acholi language and Acholi thinking in your work, and we're gonna be looking forward to talking about that.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Sure, I do want to say also that Acholi, it's a Luo language but you can say, Acholi is a language, Acholi is a land, and Acholi is the people.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. For you, exile is an enormous part of your story, exile in Kenya, trips back to Uganda, because of your father's work and the perception of his work by Idi Amin; I wonder if you could give us a, kind of a bit of the history about how that unfolded and ways within which that introduced enormous themes of exile to your life that you then paid attention to in your writing.

Juliane Okot Bitek:

I was born in exile, my father was already exiled by the person in power, Milton Obote, in the late 60s. So I never knew, I have never known what it is to be born in a country that's your country. And so the idea of home has always been fraught. When we were children in Kenya, my parents used to talk about home, which was a bit confusing because for us home was the house we lived in. But we grew to find the distinction between house and home. Eventually, when we went to Uganda- well, I think my dad tried to return to Uganda after Idi Amin was overthrown, and Idi Amin did not like his work either, so he had to stay out. So we returned to Uganda in 1980. And it was the same feeling of being strange, because we were Kenyan-born (well some of us are), which means you have a different accent, different way of being, and then people would say: where are you come from? And you say: well, I come from here, and: well, you know, you don't sound like us, you know. And it's also been the same, I've lived in Canada for 33 years now. And the question remains: where do you come from, where do you come from? So it's, it's very strange to always be foreign, wherever you are. But it's also a familiar way of being for me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. And in all of this, I hear you meditate on language. Erm, you wrote at one point: 'my father was in exile because of his writing, so my coming into the world was in the context of words having power'. Have you found words that work for you when it comes to the question of home?

Juliane Okot Bitek:

Oh. Last week, there was a meme floating about on Facebook. And it was a quote by the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz. And it says- and so I'm not even sure if it's true that it's a quote from him or not, but it says: home is where you cease to run, is the place where you cease to run from- something like that. And I remember being struck by that because it separates- the idea of home is now separated from place. And I moved to Kingston in Ontario two years ago. And it was very strange new city, I've never been in a place quite like this. And having lived in so many places, I wondered what it would be like to find a home and if we could find a home here. But recently, as I was saying earlier, I returned to- from Vancouver, and I was relieved, I had this huge sense of: wow, I'm coming back home, and that was a very strange sensation because I didn't know that I'd ever think about Kingston as home. And here I am looking forward to being in our place with our stuff and the- it's a smaller place. Mind you, the winters

are much harsher and the summers are much hotter. But it's, it's now where we live, so now I've come to think of Kingston as home, too.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
When did you begin to pay attention to the power of words, um, like, I'm moved, and I've heard you say it before about, you know, returning to Uganda, a place that had always been called home and then being asked: where's your accent from, because you had been living in Kenya. Erm, was it that that began to pay attention to the question of words and language? Or was that already in you because of what had happened to your family?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
I think it was already in our life: we already knew that to be a poet is not an easy thing. And we also understood (well I did), that my father's being a poet had held him back in one way or another. If he was at home in Uganda, perhaps his career might have taken off differently, perhaps he'd have lived longer maybe even, you know, had a better health or any of those, so I knew poetry was a very, um, could be a dangerous way of being in the world. Which was different from how I understood others understood poetry, which is, you know, a pretty line and of no, of little consequence. Yeah, so I've always understood that but I also knew, knew that there're different kinds of poems and poetry and they're understood in various ways, so not all poems are dangerous, not all poets are dangerous, right? But some are.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
D'you think that that prepared you for a career as a poet yourself, or did that keep you away from it for a while, it having borne in your family's story the kind of enormous consequences of a particular approach to poetry that your father took.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
I never intended, I never thought that I'd be a poet as a career trajectory. I knew I wanted to do creative writing at university. And my mum admonished me, she said: you know, get a real job, a real career, and you can write poetry on the side. And I suppose she knew what she was talking about, because she'd been married to a poet whose life was complicated because he was one. I, I like to say - and I should stop saying this - I like to say I sucked at everything else. Which, I tried- I took so many different courses, I tried so many other ways of being in the world, I did so many different kinds of jobs. But, eventually, it was being at school, being

immersed in academia, teaching, and writing, were the things that I did best and enjoyed best. So I suppose I just found my way here. But it wasn't something that I planned. Which is also why, I suppose, it's taken me five decades to get here. Yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
In a while I'm gonna ask you some questions about memory and remembering, Julie. But I am really curious, before we do that, about the experience of exile and diaspora, because those are literal experiences, physical experiences, and political experiences, all wrapped into one. And you've spent a lot of time thinking about diaspora: diaspora within the African continent, diaspora across the globe, black diaspora, political diaspora and political exile. What are some of the things that you think are really important for anybody for whom these are theories or concepts without personal experience, what are some of the things that you think are really important for people to know and understand about diaspora, and then particularly, exile and diaspora?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Oh, that's a big question. Because it, it presumes that I'd have any- something to say about that, to contribute to other people's understanding of it, and I'm not sure I do. I was going to say that it's a complicated way of belonging, when you, when you say: I come from, especially if you don't have a connection, say, you've never visited, or you've never spent much time in the place where you come from, or maybe you don't speak the language, so what does the claim mean to come from? And sometimes, you might say: my descendants - descendants?! ancestors - my ancestors are from there, therefore I am of that land. But what happens when the land doesn't recognise you, or when the people of that land don't recognise you: do you still belong? And I've really struggled with that question of belonging until I got to thinking, I don't have to belong in one place. Actually, it wasn't that I got to thinking; a good friend of mine died in Vancouver, and I was bereft ‘cause I still had to go to work, I still had to continue with my life, and I wanted the world to stop, because I really mourned this woman. But she was buried in Vancouver, and I thought, wow, I can now claim Vancouver because one of my own is buried here on this land. And that was a shift for me. And when you extrapolate that to think about diasporans, or exiles, the land is, has been contributed to by people who have lived in that place for a very long time, just the physical sense of, just, just their bodies, you know, they die, they’re buried, they die, they’re buried… No matter where they came from, they become part of that land, right? So that claim to a place of belonging through the land becomes then

complicated, and fraught, because there are those for whom their ancestors have been there forever, too, right? They also come from there. And so belonging becomes really, really complicated.

But if you add exile to it, and then there's a knowledge that politically you are not wanted where you come from. And if you're not wanted where you come from, and you're not accepted where you live, where do you go? How do you know your sense of self, how do you orientate yourself? And if you add language to that, there are those, like my children, who have not been brought up in the language of their parents. If you can't speak the language of your ancestors, and there's other people who, like, similar to that, can you make that claim? Or people like me, who speak some Acholi, but not deeply, not philosophically- can I make that claim? Or anybody who speaks a language, I speak English, I teach English too: can I make the claim to being, to Englishness through language? Is there cultural belonging because we [were] taught to live in a language so all the cultural references are in that language. But would the English accept me as one of their own because I speak it? It becomes really complicated to think about. And I think, I suppose what I would offer is that exile, diaspora complicates some terms that others don't think about, like belonging, and language.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and this is The Corrymeela Podcast; with me today is the poet and writer Juliane Okot Bitek. Julie, you published a book called *100 Days*, which is a book about a country neighbouring to Uganda, but Rwanda, and counting down over 100 poems that go from 100, down to one, counting down in a kind of a clock in a way that's remembering and imagining and reflecting and thinking about genocide and thinking about national trauma. I wonder if you could say a little bit about that project, and then bring in some of your curiosity about truth, and bearing witness, and feeling into that whole project.

Juliane Okot Bitek:

Let me begin by saying that that book is not about Rwanda. It's about memory. And it's about what we might remember or forget 20 years after a genocide has taken place. And the genocide I was thinking about was the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Which, even by saying it that way, I'm picking a particular way of talking about that time in 1994. I am not from Rwanda. But I know that there's been debates of how to call what happens: some people say it's properly called the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. I was interested in 2014 that 20 years had gone by.

And what I knew about Rwanda was mostly, in terms of a book, was mostly by an American, Jewish American writer called Philip Gourevitch. And I think the title of the book is 'I regret to inform you' and, it's part of a longer phrase. And it was interesting to me that, um…and I'd been doing some graduate work on memory and forgetting at the time- I was starting to write my dissertation and think about it. Though what did we who are from that part of the world, East Africa, have to say about what was happening in our neighbourhood? In 1994, a war had been raging in my own homeland, in Acholi, since 1986. And it was nowhere near the world headlines, so I knew my homeland was already on fire for a long time, in a war between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army. And in 1994, the genocide against the Bosnians was happening, the genocide in Bosnia was happening, and in Darfur, and then Rwanda. So I remember thinking: so much shit is happening at the same time.

And 20 years later, what's the responsibility of those of us who are from those homelands to talk about what we remember and what we forget, given that, since, thinking about the Rwandan genocide, most of what we knew and talked about and reflected on was the terrible terrible terrible details about saying what happened in those 100 days. But I wanted to think about everyday people. What might they think about? What might they sound like, not think about, but what might they sound like? And so, um, in April of that year, beginning of April, which is usually when people start to think about the commemoration of the 100 days, I saw a post on Facebook by a Kenyan-American artist called Wangechi Mutu. And she had posted an image of a- a photograph of a woman holding a sign with the word- with 100 on it. And I understood immediately when I saw it that she was going to count down; I don't know how I knew this. But I wrote to her and I said: can we count down together? I'm a poet, you're an artist, we'll just do this together. So she said yes, and every day she posted a photo, every day I posted a poem, for 100 days. And then when I finished, I thought: now what? Does it mean that the war ended, the genocide stopped happening after 100 days? It became really complicated to think about the work of numbers. You count to 100, and you remember 100 days. But of course, of course, it goes without saying that this went on for many 100 days, many. And we are still in those 100 days, right? So time became just a really messed up way of thinking about people's experiences. And I also wanted to write poems that might capture a sense of what everyday looks like; and mind you I was also thinking about Acholi, I wasn't just think- I have not been to Rwanda even, I was just, I was thinking about Darfur, I was thinking about Bosnia, I was thinking about everywhere where the world was in flames.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You have a poem, Julie, that goes through like an A-Z, something like a poem that a child might learn - you know, 'A is for apple, B is for bat' - but you go through the names of places all around the world that have known atrocity, and many of them knew atrocity during the 90s. And so you create this kind of sibling family of place names in a poem that lots of us would have recognised the structure in the context of something that we'd have known as children, but you kind of present the adult version that knows war. And of course, children know that too, that's part of the atrocity of it. There's a kind of a solidarity, but maybe an accusation, and there's a, there's a difficult innocence in the poem, too, because you think people shouldn't know this, of any age, but do.

Juliane Okot Bitek:

And each letter makes it a unique experience of, of whatever memory of war or difficulty there is. But together, it's so much bigger, so much bigger, right, and this, if we think about the Roman alphabet, A-Z, as the letters that encapsulates all our ways of writing - of course, I know there are other alphabets, but let's just think about this one - then all the words and all the ideas are captured from A-Z in these languages, and so are all the places and so are all the memories. But I wanted to write about what it might mean to think about a hundred days without going through the details of, of the gory details of war.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Yeah, and 'cause there's, there's parts of the book where you are just recounting something that happens between two people, or you're recounting a memory, or looking at the sky… Ways within which you are, as you said, in parallel to the kind of atrocity of the form of a hundred days, you're looking at experiences of memory, and perhaps asking why is it that certain gory details, horrific and forensically true as they are, are the ones that are remembered in the public stage when you're amplifying other ones alongside?

Juliane Okot Bitek:

Mhm, and you know those, those terrible, terrible things that happened- it's not that, it's not that we don't remember them by not mentioning them; it's that we are not completely defined and only defined by the terrible things that have happened to us. We are also people before the war and we will be people after the war. And people are people beyond what happened- the terrible things that happened to them.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
So is remembering, then, also about remembering who you are, rather than just what happened?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Right, who we are as people. So it's a human way of being in the world, that people will feel things, we can see the sky, we notice a broken pencil. We remember the touch of somebody, right?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. What is it that you know about yourself in your call to remember here, and do you find that role difficult as you think about the *100 Days* book, as well as some of your other work too, 'cause you seem to be compelled to and drawn to matters of great political importance, often to do with questions to do with land and remembering and amplifying brilliance and amplifying things that other people might wish to forget. What's that experience of having that vocation of poet like for you?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
I think I've come to understand poetry as a, as a difficult and important work to do. For some people it's a hobby, for some people it's a pleasure, for some people it's a way to escape, or a way to write about something pleasurable, maybe. For me, it's not. And I say this, because I remember not that long ago, a friend of mine was ill in Vancouver. And some people got together and said: let's create a small Chat Book of poems to give her to feel better, like a super-duper get well card. And, and so we were all asked to contribute a love poem, or a- and I didn't have any, not even one. And that really struck me and I had to sit and write a love poem for someone to feel better- that was very, very weird, and I thought: am I just so angry all the time looking for the hard things to write about?! But, I also remember that um, during the pandemic, when the pandemic first broke in 2020, I thought to myself: ooh, now I can sit and do another hundred days project. But, that quickly became apparent to me that it's going to be so many 100 days. But I wanted to, to use every day as a moment to think about the news, what we were hearing filtered back to us, and how I could memorialise that moment through poetry. And so for me, poetry is a tool to articulate or to document what's happening around me. And that's often what's interesting politically, or socially. Um, when I do it in a poetic way, I feel better

about what- the work that I'm doing. So it's not really to do with my family, although, although I can say that that's where I got the idea to do it. But my insistence on it I think is mine…

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah, you made it your own.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Yeah. In the way that I use every day to write.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast; with me today is Ugandan poet and writer and teacher, Juliane Okot Bitek. Julie, I'd like to talk to you about notions of justice and peace and reconciliation. 'Cause much in all as you deal with truth, you also bring yourself with questions of curiosity, and uncovering, and sometimes critique and pushing, to these terms like justice and peace and reconciliation. I wonder if you could say a few things about those; like you said at one point 'reconciliation as the only goal is a noble idea, but it diminishes the experiences of the survivors, especially the harsh situation imposed by the oppressors. And often, as has been highlighted by others, there was no prior relationship to begin with that is worthwhile reconciling'.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Hmm. I was thinking: where did I write that, where did I write that; I think that comes from 'A Chronology of Compassion', I think. And that was a piece I did, if I recall right, in 2012. So I was stuck- at the time I was thinking about my homeland, Northern Uganda, still embroiled in this horrific war. But things were changing, I think the war in Acholi in Uganda had stopped but had moved on to, to what's now South Sudan, and to Central African Republic, and the Congo, so people were still suffering. And there were debates about being brought- people being brought to justice for what they had done. People were being arrested; some people were being welcomed home. Thousands upon thousands of young people had been kidnapped and forced to fight in the war. Thousands and thousands had died because of the war, and from the effects of the war- being displaced, and all that kind of thing. So this call for justice often meant that - in the, in the formal sense, the western legal tradition - often meant that somebody would be accused of something, taken through the court process and possibly incarcerated. But at the same time, many of these people, er, not many, I should say...folks had been kidnapped and

forced into atrocity, so they were at the same time victims of the war; at the same time, they were perpetrators of violence on other people. But it was more important, I think, for Acholi people, to think about peace. And so all of a sudden there was- whereas most of us think about: no justice, no peace, and so we link peace and justice together, in Acholi the debate was either justice or peace. Because if you have your home, and one child is a victim, and the other child is a perpetrator, what is this western form of justice that demands that one child be harmed for good and the other child be incarcerated for good? There is no peace there, right? And in our traditional form of making peace after violence, it's always about bringing people together, through the rituals and, and discussions and negotiations. So that afterwards, the hurt is acknowledged, but peace is the more important thing.

And so it made me think about justice as an exercise for thinking about how to deal with violence, but it's not always targeting peace. And then I, not subsequently, but I was also thinking about a Canadian poet, NourbeSe Philip, in, particularly in her book *Zong!*, which is a very, very powerful text on thinking about: what does justice mean for people who are enslaved and thrown overboard a ship, when the owners of that ship landed it in Liverpool, I think it was, and claimed insurance money for lost property. Yeah? So there might be laws for insurance, and lost property. But there was no law for the people who had been thrown overboard who themselves were forcibly kidnapped. And she wrote a whole book, I think, reflecting and thinking about this, and also debating about what it means to do this book in English, which would not have been the language of the people who were enslaved. But at the same time as a descendant of enslaved people, that was the only language she has to work with. And so that connection between language and law, and justice and peace, became a very murky but interesting way to think about what a poet can do. So for me, it's become using poetry as a place to end the page, right? The, the page you work on, to think of how to dismantle ideas of what we know about: what is justice, or what is peace, right? Or what does language do, and if we want to tell a different way of understanding something, must we rely on the same rules of the language? And poetry allows us to do things differently enough that we don't have to rely on those rules of language.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It seems to me that you're often looking for different ways into these concepts, through language, through poetry, through art, and through political critique as well, in order to say: the thing that's being put across needs to be much more complicated, deliberately. You've

written critically about public attention to Northern Uganda during a particular period of time, about 10 years ago, I wonder if you could say a little bit about what your public critique was, Julie.

Juliane Okot Bitek:

I think I've been railing against how we understand the war in Northern Uganda versus how it's been told to us through the media or through academia, and other, other forms of sharing knowledge. I have learned a lot and I continue to learn from the women, some women who survived that war. And they're organised in a group called the Women's Advocacy Network. Many of them were forced, were kidnapped and forced to fight, and then they returned, and many of them returned with children who they had been forced to have while in captivity. And these women really changed the way I think about what happened and what's important to think about. As folks will probably know, after many, after wars, there's this idea of reconciliation and making peace, and sometimes governments will offer resettlement packages, as they did in Uganda for those who returned. But at one point, it was only men who got…so you give in your guns, and then you might get a home, some money, maybe a piece of land, some place, some way that allows you to start. But the women were offered nothing. Nothing. They came with children, and they were offered nothing; mind you, many of them didn't have guns to give in. But they were offered nothing. And then the other thing was that they were given a document to indicate that they had been, I don't know, for lack of a better word, forgiven by the government, you know? And what was very clear from these women was that: where was the government when we were being kidnapped? Who should be doing the forgiving? Whose responsibility is it to take care of all of us if it's not the government? Why should some people be given resettlement packages and some not? Right? And so if we relied on the academia and media to get us to understand what was happening, we would not know that these women challenged the government, went to the parliament and said: we also need resettlement packages. And they found the language and they found the, you know, the wherewithal to speak out and speak up. And they organised themselves, and they're supporting themselves, and they just make me think differently about how we come through war. So they're, they're my big teachers, I should say.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Your most recent book, Julie, *A is for Acholi* starts off with a certain alphabet poem, as well, where A is for everything! And Acholi is for everything. I wonder if you could read a few of those poems and then talk to us about some of the layers about what you're doing in that.

Juliane Okot Bitek:

OK, thank you.

Extract from 'An Acholi Alphabet'*

A is for Acholi[1] Achol the Black one & the black one
A is for the apple that was lobbed at us from a garden far away & exploded in our compound
A is for me

---

[1]Adam
My grandmother's oldest brother
This means that I can trace my lineage back to this first man
This means that the earth is young
Or as I believed as a child my great-uncle was that old

B is for Acholi[2] that's who we are
B is for floor smeared in cow dung
B is for the floor with give

---

[2]Beatitudes
& other fables

C is for Acholi[3]
C is for stories like floors with give
C is for Acholi & British & Canadian ID papers

---

3 Cartography
The trace of the arc of the apple to this point in time

D is for Acholi[4]
D is for the November fog & endless rain
D is for brown Vancouver Augusts

---

[4] Devotion
To family to self to nation & sometimes of another to us
One day as we waited for the bus to Kampala a man very tall very dark white clothing red eyes
There is your bus to Kampala he pointed
We ran ran ran & after we had settled inside our mother asked if any of us had thanked him in our rush
We looked back at the crowds
How does such a presence of a man disappear

E is for Acholi[5]
E is for the human voice in the violin
E is for the catch of the Acholi dance

---

[5] Externality
A condition of always
My mother tells us how her grandfather always told her everything I do I do for you
My mother tells of when she was newly arrived in Canada how a man approached her and asked if she was the granddaughter of Mohamed Lagara
You wear his face he told her something like that
As a boy this man was the beneficiary of a kindness from my mother's grandfather
All this time later the generosity of Mohamed Lagara would be part of a welcome to a country full of people who had no memory of who we were

F is for Acholi[6]
F is for small heaps of mango for sale by the roadside
F is for small tables of homemade brew also for sale by the roadside

---

[6] Fixation
On the thing that is always the thing in these part
The memo no employee can wear their hair in braids at work

G is for Acholi[7]
G is for dead poets & dead singers
G is for the music holding words we hang on to

---

[7]Gauntlet
We only sing the songs we recall from childhood
How we keep ourselves tethered with songs that our own children don't know

H is for Acholi[8]
H is for serendipity
H is for five-syllable words that mean nothing most days

---

[8]Heresy
Decades now we celebrate Thanksgiving
Remember our delight when the Safeway turkey came with mash potatoes & cranberry sauce

I is for Acholi[9]
I is for the arc of that apple lobbed at us from the garden of Eden
I is for the arc of that apple

---

[9]Inconstancy
How else are we still here
We bend to your traditions
We hold Thanksgiving Dinner
We forget the Fort in Patiko held slaves
But we remember that Samuel Baker's wife was named after the moon because of her white skin

J is for Acholi[10]
J is for hazy yellowy traffic lights through fog
J is for the reach of claws into your chest

---

[10]Justice
For who
When
Where

**From* A is for Acholi *(Wolsak and Wynn, 2022). In the collection, each letter entry takes up its own page.*

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I find myself as I listen to you read those and, you know, 'J is for Acholi', I hear myself saying that Acholi is for J which is that, you know, land and language and place is going everywhere through you with Acholi into wherever it is that you are in the world, Julie.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
You know, I've been thinking about what this book is about. And I think I'm coming to think that it's about me trying to locate myself and what it means to be an Acholi person. Because somebody born in exile, who has never lived at home in Acholi land for any proper time, what does it mean to say I am an Acholi person? And so for me, it just seemed to be that everything that I am is Acholi. This is where I begin from. Even though I don't live there, even though my Acholi is limited and broken, even though I don't look like or sound like I'm from there… Everything is for Acholi. Yeah.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Juliane Okot Bitek, thank you very much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Thanks, Pádraig. Thanks for having me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Thanks for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast, with me today was Juliane Okot Bitek. Her most recent books are* Song and Dread*, and* A is for Acholi*, published under the name Ontoniya J. Okot Bitek. We've got links to those in the show notes.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Are there poems or books or films or works of art that you have turned to again and again?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Absolutely. The book that has haunted me the most is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Yeah, and the bible- God knows why! But those two.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Heart of Darkness and the bible- God knows why!

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Yeah!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
In some ways, Julie, we've been talking about this the whole time, but could you tell us about a time when one of your national identities felt important to you?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Oh, yeah, when, in the recent declaration by the government that homosexuality was going to be, was again criminalised, I felt really ashamed, really, really, truly ashamed. Because I've been doing all this work, to, to get to understand us humans as people with potential and rights to be in the world. And there is a country where my ancestors were born that is criminalising people's way of living. And it added to the story about Ugandans as the Lord's Resistance Army, Ugandans as Idi Amin, and now Ugandans as people who hate gay people. That, that really makes me feel awful and ashamed and angry.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And is there a very short story you can tell us about a time where you said something that surprised you?

Juliane Okot Bitek:
Last week, somebody said that I told her about complicated joy, and I thought: what? I don't remember, but she said she thinks about complicated joy and thinks about me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Well, in the name of complicated joy, thanks very much, Julie.