

Nottingham Contemporary

Thu 10 Mar
7-8.30pm

Five Bodies

[Live transcript](#)

KEYWORDS

poem, scale, birds, thinking, trees, roots, world, poetry, space, tiny, interested, called, live, plants, yams, woodland, leaves, read

SPEAKERS

Mina Gorji, Jason Allen-Paisant, Olivia Aherne

01:12 Olivia Aherne

Hi everyone, welcome. My name is Olivia Aherne. I'm the curator of exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary. And tonight it's my pleasure to welcome you all to Roots and Weeds with Jason Allen-Paisant and Mina Gorji. This is the second event of our second series of Five Bodies live readings, an online programme of poetry writing and text. All of this season's Five Bodies events are organised under the theme of entanglements and they investigate poetic ecologies in the Anthropocene, opening up new conversations around coexistence, resilience and sustainability. For those of you tuning in for the first time, Nottingham Contemporary is a contemporary art centre based in the East Midlands. We work with artists, communities and academics to reflect on contemporary art, society and visual cultures. Five Bodies was imagined in conjunction with our colleagues Sarah Jackson and Dr. Linda Kemp from the critical poetics research group at Nottingham Trent University. Tonight's event includes AI driven live captioning, which can be accessed via a link in the YouTube chat. And this will open in a separate window on your browser. And within that you can adjust the scale and the layout to suit your requirements. And now to our

Talk

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speakers this evening, I'm delighted to introduce Jason Allen-Paisant and Mina Gorji. Jason is a scholar and writer whose work explores embodied experience in the context of Afro diasporic politics and world building. His most recent works reflect on the complex meanings of nature in Black life. His critically acclaimed collection *Thinking with Trees* published by Carcanet press, has been praised as a bold and impressive debut by *The Guardian* and as expansive fracturing subversive book by *the Irish Times*. His work has also appeared in *Granta*, *The Guardian*, *the Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, the BBC and other venues, and he has been the recipient of a prestigious Leverhulme early career fellowship. Jason holds a doctorate in Mediaeval and Modern Languages from the University of Oxford, and now works as a lecturer in poetry and decolonial thought at the University of Leeds. He's also currently developing a nonfiction book entitled *Primitive Child: On Blackness, Landscape and Reclaiming Time*. Joining Jason this evening, I'm also delighted to welcome writer and poet Mina Gorji. Mina was born in Iran and lives in Cambridge, where she is Associate Professor at the Faculty of English at University of Cambridge, and a fellow of Pembroke College. Her debut *Art of Escape*, published by Carcanet in 2020, a telegraph Book of the Month has been described as a collection of exquisite miniatures that suggest worlds by Five a books, best poetry books of 2020 and intricate considered poems, which encourage us to democratise our attention and empathy by *The Guardian*. She's published poems in *Poetry Review*, *Magma* and the *Forward* book of poetry amongst others. She has also written a study of John Clare's poetry and essays on weeds, rudeness, little things and listening. A lyric critical essay, *Listening for Stars* was published in *Poetry Review* in autumn 2021. And her second poetry collection *Scale* will be published by Carcanet in July later this year. In terms of the running order of tonight's event, Mina and Jason are going to read for around 15 minutes each. They'll then be in conversation together before each giving us a final few poems. Following that, I'll be joining them both to field any questions you might have. So please do send through any

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thoughts or questions via the YouTube chat and I'll keep an eye on that throughout the evening. And now I'll hand over to Mina for the first few readings.

05:25 Mina Gorji

Thank you for coming along. And thanks to Olivia for inviting me and for this opportunity to read and think and talk with Jason, whose work I admire. We've been thinking about roots and weeds, not just in terms of botany, but as a figure of consciousness, exploring the way they bring into form and focus, questions of place and belonging, ideas both Jason and I are both concerned with in different ways in our poems. I'll be reading from my first collection, *Art of Escape* and some new poems from my forthcoming collection *Scale*, which is out later this year. I'm excited to be able to think together with Jason this evening and with you about roots and weeds. And I'd like to invite you to join the conversation in the chat and in the q&a session at the end. What does it mean, to be rooted to have roots? What are we rooted to? Where do our roots extend? How far down? How far across? How far back in space, in time? What is it to be rootless? Does a migrant have roots? What is our relationship to the earth? Do we feel the ground with our feet, with our hands, with our whole bodies? Do we feel a connection to the earth? I wanted to start with an image that has raised some of these questions for me. It's a picture of a hippo. It's the skeleton of a hippo that I encountered here in Cambridge in a museum in fact, where I live, near where I live, and the hippo, which I think you can see now was discovered only a few miles from Cambridge in the chalk pits in a village called Barrington. We don't tend to think of hippos as native English creatures, but they were 125,000 years ago. Hippos wallowed in the river shallows. This hippo asked me to think again, about what I understood native to mean, what is a native creature? According to which scale of time? And this question has been one I've been exploring in my poetry in my collection *Scale*. And the first poem I'd like to read isn't a hippo poem. I haven't written that poem yet. It's about a local chalk pit though and the bones that I discovered

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there, fossil bones. I wanted to think about what those bones might be telling us, what bones can tell us, the colour of bones, the evidence of bones. What about the history of climate or climate change, of how something or someone lived or died. Variations in white. April hedges in flower, wheat is ankle high. Follow the green rose into spring until the ground opens sudden into chalk and sliding down the quarry side. Shoes, hands, faces disappear in white. We found the bones in chalk. Fossil bones hard as flint, time opens up imagining the marrow slowly hollowing the hollow, turning slowly white. Not grinding stone, charred pot or knife unearthed from some ancient site, a human femur, fractured but healed, revealing someone stayed behind binding the wound, tending the fallen, trace of being civilised, evidence of bones. The colour of bones isn't fixed, in the living body slightly pink. Blanched in an x ray, freshly dried, bright white, yellowing with age combusts to grey sometimes with reddish patches, darkening to black, the hottest flame burns white. I want to shift from hot to extreme cold now and to think again about bones, our bones and the bones of a wolf. In ice, they found a wolf intact, its face and first still legible after 40,000 years. Cold preserves the living for a time, slowing the heart to almost still, snow will fall covering our tracks, ice crystallised inside our bones, what can survive the glaciers. I'm interested in what happens to ideas of roots and the native, to the idea of belonging when we shift the scale of our thinking, shift the scale of time, from a tiny mouse at the edge of a volcano to the slow movement of rock formations, the time of a mouse's heartbeat to deep time, geological time. The next poem begins at the edge of a volcano and thinks about the creatures that make their homes in this extreme and precarious terrain. And it goes on to remember the extinct volcanoes in England in the Lake District. And to think about the plants and creatures that are native there. Daffodils, for instance, which were in fact brought over by the colonisers, Roman soldiers, and are now thought of his native plants. Field notes from the edge of a volcano. Pinatubo mouse, is the ground warm? Does your heart sense the

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volcano's rhythms? How do you know when to run? Darwin's racer, you have no natural predators on volcano Island. Only the volcano, now in the blue light, the world is quiet. The Amaryllis opened overnight, three flowers pinkish red, quietly look out. The tiny flies around it's stork are sitting still. In England, the volcanoes are extinct. They have been naturalised to beauty spots, a landscape for adventurers to scale and to admire. Arcadian folds erupting into daffodils underneath a memory of fire solidified, hematite, cobalt, graphite, magnetite, the rocks are moving at a different scale. The daffodils beside the lake were brought here by the Romans, some say for their healing powers. What is a native plant? According to which scale of time, triassic ferns, flowerless, rows of russet spores, braille to the wind, Pleistocene fir trees sending pollen into future air, into a forest where wolves will track the footprints of two children abandoned in the dark. At night, the sky is glittering with sparks. Between the darkness and the dark, the planets with their quiet moons appear. The next poem is about a plant often considered a weed, the Oxford Ragwort. It was brought to this country by botanist from the slopes of Mount Etna, and planted in the Botanic Gardens in Oxford, from which it soon escaped. People often talk about urbanisation and industrialisation destroying the natural world. But this Ragwort thrived in the conditions brought by industrialisation, the coming of the railways in particular, train tracks aligned with clinker, a material which is very similar to the volcanic Earth on the slopes of Mount Etna. It's also a plant which thrived, this is the ragwort, in the burnt earth of bomb craters during the war. So this is a poem about resilience. Oxford Ragwort from Etna's cinder slopes to the Botanic Gardens, *senecio squalidus* escaped, it slipped out of its cultivated bed, the ancient cemetery walls, the city's bounds. Following the gaps in paving stones, the new laid tracks of railway lines south east along the clinker beds into the heart of London. Bomb craters burnt out scrub land, scorch Earth again. The next poem turns its focus to the skies and thinks about the stars. It emerged after I went to see a star map in the institute

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of astronomy near where I live. And I realised for the first time that the constellations we see are different depending on where we stand on the earth, different in the northern and southern hemispheres. So it's a poem about that, and about what star maps reveal and don't reveal about space and distance. Scale. The map reveals so many stars, two constellations in the shape of bears, a peacock Parvo in the southern hemisphere, the spaces between galaxies, the emptiness, the not quite emptiness, it doesn't show the single atom H in every cubic metre, the atom that is not quite still, how cold it is between the galaxies, the snowdrops in the garden the morning after frost. Quite a few of the poems in my collection explore temperature, its experience and effects. I suppose we're all preoccupied with temperature at the moment. And the next poem thinks about those creatures adapted to extreme cold. Cold, at the bottom of the Arctic brittle stars, the temperature is permanently low, or has been until now, so little light. Currents carry whale song far away and far below bristle worms, anemones, occasionally crabs and eyeless creatures moving slow, untouched by light, invisible to stars. Imagine floating in Andromeda, between two distant stars, temperature of emptiness, a family of field mice, huddling against the cold. Newt is at the edge of life, waiting for the temperature to rise. This little stillness leaves us cold. Another thing I'm interested in is how a migrant experiences temperature and temperature difference. My grandmother arrived on these shores from Madras in South India. And this next poem is about her experience. I was thinking about the shock of that first winter in this country, and remembering that she always felt cold here. Waiting for snow. We feel instead, the emptiness of rain. Inside the house, it's cold. We have been waiting for the world to be forgiven for a moment into white. The pavement glitters crystalline with ice. My grandmother had never felt the snow before. She knew the touch of monsoon rain, humidity so thick the body slowed, before the shock of Edinburgh rain, soaking her sari, with it's cold and grey. This last poem is about a bird that has become native to southwest London where I grew up, and

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where my parents live. Parakeet, flash of green up in the silver birch, neon squawking gaudy green against the dappled quiet of suburbia, its lawn mowers and distant radios. Thanks very much, over to Jason now.

21:11 Jason Allen-Paisant

Thank you so much Mina. It is a pleasure being here and reading with you, listening to your poems, and the wonderful, vivid commentary you make around them. And I'm looking forward to the conversation. I wanted to show an image of a fallen beech that I took a photo of in Roundhay park. I don't know if you can see but the roots are, it's the upturned roots, the intricacy of the roots how they weave above and under each other. And how big the base of that tree constituted by the fallen by the upturned roots is I was quite impressed by this and it inspired me, it inspired quite a bit of thinking about roots, about entanglement and just about all that we do not see, all of the tree that is actually all that is is actually not visible. But which is so vital to the tree, to us. Then at the base behind what you now see, there seems to be an entire world, the pattern of the soil, the elevations that look like cliffs or giant rocks seem to be a miniature of other landscapes. A miniature of mountains. It's so, it's such a world, such a huge world that I found right there. And I think it there's such a sense of an apprehension of our, of timescales, long timescales when you're standing in front of a thing like that. But I want to start with I know we'll be talking a little bit more about that. I want to start with a poem, which is the second poem in my book, it's called naming. It's called naming and it's in three parts. Naming. One. In the word I hear the beautiful call of bird I do not know. I wish I knew the names of birds and could identify them by their songs. It would be so much nicer to say I heard the warble of a wood pigeon as the red floor of the woodland stretched before me like an avenue through the high rises of beeches and oaks. As I walk on the path and feel the soft cushion, feel my foot press down into the flesh of the duff. Because a name is reassurance, a comfort in the flesh to hold these songs in the trees so something could

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be mine. Warble, trill, bell, fluting? something nearly right. Two. The urge I feel is to give things names, but everything is already named. The urge I feel is to connect with this land, these plants birds, songs, these trees. To name things would be perverse. Perhaps the place within will always escape the name. In the mind one leaves, leaves and leaves but on stone Earth and grass one stays forever. I have a few trees on my tongue. Oak, Maple, Birch, I have a few birds on my tongue. Seagull, Mallard, Redbreast I have a few plants on my tongue. Rhododendron English Ivy, Iris, I have started to see that nothing is itself. Everything turns to something else. Like birch bark becoming vesse-de-loup, I prefer the sound of my wife's ancestors, the ashes of their throat. Like the rhododendrons becoming fighting pythons, and me gathering chestnuts, like the rhododendron barks becoming fighting pythons, and me gathering chestnuts for dinner, in a stream that dips below ground, and re-emerges often, this life, I no longer know. Three. When I go walking in Malham, there's still a part of me that didn't want to come, that doesn't want to be in this land of caramel jackets. All I can handle is nature on the fingernails, my grandmother planting negro yams, shaping the land, all I can handle is the landscape within me, not scenery spread out on a canvas. A lot of my work is about time, I reflect a lot about time and how to make sense of time in our bodies in the context of history, but the woodland is such a generative space for thinking about time and dwelling in and with different rhythms of time. And certainly that tree is one such experience of looking at it. And to think and thinking about process, trying to grasp a sense of the process of our own bodies, the processes of processes of change, the processes by which we become inextricably interlinked with the biosphere, with the ecology that seems to be outside of us, but is very much a part of us. And these next two poems, Leisure, come out of a thinking around what we lose in the experience of racism. When the body is subject to the daily assaults of racism, what does that experience do to us in our relationship to time? I think it robs us of time in a sense, is a sort of immobilisation a kind of stuckness that

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can be produced. When one has to be constantly responding to provocation to hurt, to anger and so on. There's a sort of negative energy that is produced that robs us of the opportunity of various different opportunities of occupying our moment. And so Leisure, there is part one, and part two, I will read both of them. Leisure one. The sun splashes its light on the trees, their exposed skins glisten. Inside me a living thing is ripening. In this month of December when night falls in early afternoon, it is a struggle to get here. And now I am here. And now that I'm here, I am living, a sadness returns. A sadness for the boy I once was. What was my poverty? Was it living in a space that was too little, to go far might have been just to enter the woods behind the house. But there was a wall separating me from it. Leisure part two. Our ancestors bodies were property. We've carried that knowledge with us. You will find it in our saying, chicken merry, hawk de near, happy children be wary. The Hawk is always around the corner. People who live in the wake of slavery and plantation, we know we must always be on guard. There's something about containment, self policing, about not being able to totally let go. Deep down we know that that ability to occupy your space, to look at the world from inside yourself, rather than at yourself from the outside is also about time - to occupy space is to occupy time. Even as a child you internalise that, that your life is less deserving of time than the lives of others. That for you, time is never to be wasted. That your life is marked by doing, working. And at a certain point, this word begins to hover above you, around you. You hear it on television, you learn it as a concept. You can't remember when or where you first heard it, leisure, only certain people have it. Do they have it because they can name it the way Westerners name ideas and turn them into money. And now you must unlearn this learning, learn to carry your body with the confidence of those entitled to time. I'm going to read a couple of short poems that are about the joy of being in the woods, or in the park, greenspace as they say, and the first one is called Spring. Simply spring. Happy children in predictable hordes take the way home that goes through the park because the sun is out

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and because of you, galaxies of sepals changing into masked nights. Daffodils. Speculation on future Blackness. It's time to write about daffodils again, to hear a different sound from the word daffodil. Imagine daffodils in the corner of a sound system in Clapham. Can't you? Well, you must try to imagine daffodils in the hands of a Black family on a Black walk in spring. Among the great oaks in autumn, among the oaks, my skin is a type of bark. I give birth to rocks. The same thing that happens to me happens to them. A leaf will flutter down my roots and into another world. Turning to ghosts creeping back as the light goes low. I am painted dancers sprouting from the vines, the strings of my body vibrate to the strings of the rain. Just doing a time check to see how much am I time I've used up. So just time for one. One more short poem and it's a poem that is going to be published in a forthcoming anthology of Black British writings called More Fire: An Anthology of black British writing. And the poem is called Learning Birdsong. Verbs clear the head and enter the flesh. Birds are nearer, nouns, the spirits of occasions, I catch a song and five others escape, a noun cannot hold the sound of birds. The woodland always is poem awaiting. Do not forget this. Okay, shall we have a conversation, Mina? See, I think you're on mute.

36:15 Mina Gorji

Forgive me, I was saying. Yes, please, let's have a conversation. And that was wonderful to hear you and wonderful to hear your poems.

36:22 Jason Allen-Paisant

Likewise.

36:23 Mina Gorji

Yeah. And that. Yeah, I was so interested in the idea of naming also in your poems, and then the sounds of, the idea of naming as a kind of, is it a kind of possession or kind of? Yeah, but I was wondering if there are some of the which kinds of birds, which kinds of birds might be seeming, whether any birds which seemed to be local birds here, which were also local

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in other places, like where you were growing up, or if there were if there were any crossover birds, like birds, robins, and yeah, I know that nightingales live, I was shocked to hear nightingales live across the world. Actually, they're not just not well, I knew that yeah a lot of the garden birds we have in this country are international. So I wondered if any of the woodland birds were, or if you'd thought about that?

37:37 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yeah, I actually the parakeet is a bird that I knew from Jamaica. I was quite surprised to hear that it was, it had become common in London, I think is what you said.

37:52 Mina Gorji

Yeah. They're all over Southwest London, South East London. They're in the trees, in the Silver Birch trees along the river with the pigeons. They like totally, they're flying in formations across the suburban gardens. Yeah, it's amazing that they're definitely local London birds now, but I think it was like, since the late 19th century. A couple of them escaped. I think they were I don't know. I didn't know they were in Jamaica.

38:20 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yeah. We have those in Jamaica, as well. And when I think of Parakeet I just think of birds that we, I and my friends and I used to you know, shoot, we used to go bird hunting, shoot birds with a slingshot, which is, which is that the you know, I I've got to be honest, that's, perhaps that was our way of learning about birds. I'd love to hear what other people have if there are people who have that experience. I don't know that people from the Caribbean might be aware of that. I got to, I first was exposed to bird watching when I came to live in Europe. That was never a thing back home. I suppose we have more of a should I say practical, and we see birds as food.

39:31 Mina Gorji

Parakeets as well?

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39:34 Jason Allen-Paisant

No, I don't think parakeets. I remember the baldpate which is a bird endemic to the Americas. But I, you perhaps won't be surprised to hear that I've been learning the names of birds which is what the poem is about, that's what it begins as the launching off point of the poem to talk about a different relationship to and I use this you know the word in inverted commas "nature", a different relationship to the space, nature in a more, you know, as a sort of a romantic sense of place, a place that you go into, to, you know, whether it's to find yourself or to go walking or that sort of thing. And there's a lot that comes with that for me. I mean, all of that to say that, where I'm from, we, people have a different relationship to what's called nature here. So that a lot of my yeah, anyway, I don't want to, I want to hear you talk a little bit about about that. Just to say that I was struck by your poems, I love variations in white, I'm looking at the form of your points, which I realised that people might not be seeing, I realised that your lines tend to be very short. Yeah. And struck by that. Yeah, struck by some lines are just one word, and I wonder whether the tightness of that has to do with the individual word. That's something that you might be doing with with the word itself, what do you think?

41:48 Mina Gorji

Yeah, the words that come just in one line, they have to stand up to a lot, they have to stand up to a lot, because they've been given the whole line. But I think I was trying to create a kind of space around the words or the word and trying to let the words yeah, to see those words. And to hear those words in the kind of space which we tend not to experience them in that way in conversation, or in longer sentences. I mean, I find like, you know, a long form of a five stress iambic pentameter line very long, I don't think I can write, it's very difficult for me to write such long. So I think I was trying to carve away and give space and it's like, give air, to let it resonate, let it open in a certain way. And the line, the short lines. It puts a lot of pressure on each word, but it also lets it open in a certain

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way, and sound. And that poem, I think it was to do with tiny, yeah, discovering things in chalk, white things in white chalk and tiny incremental changes. And I think maybe that was part of what I was trying to do with the form and have tiny movements like that. So they gave a sense of, maybe in that poem, a kind of digging and tunnelling or a kind of going down, yes, the kind of digging in a way that poem into these tiny differences in in the colour white, between chalk, between burned shades of bone, trying to think about those smallest changes and how meaningful they are. So like, if you're an archaeologist, the shape, there's an amazing scale, a bone scale, I don't know what it's actually called, archaeologists have a bone scale. And there are these, like, you know, it's like, having each shade means something, like burnt in this way, this is what this had, you know, at this time, it's a kind of decoding of the time, or the smaller shades from bright white, you know, all the way through to charred black and then each one has a kind of, so I was interested in the language of those incremental shifts in colour, but also how we might create a kind of experience of that maybe in words, I don't know entirely.

44:28 Jason Allen-Paisant

No, it makes sense to me. Because there's also like a feeling of a series, it being a series of vignettes as well, seems quite in line with with what you're doing. Which is probably a sort of looking at the thing from different angles, you know, perhaps the, like a series of cinematic snapshots.

44:54 Mina Gorji

Maybe yeah, and I was interested in in short forms like Haiku for instance, or, you know, how can you what, you know, I haven't written actual Haikus but I'm interested in reading them, and then, you know, condensation of things into the smallest possible space, maybe, I don't know if that has anything to do with what you can carry in a small space, if you've experienced migration, what you get used to the idea of how things, how small things, you know, carry a lot,

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memories, associations, you can't take everything with you when you leave somewhere. So I don't know, if that spareness has something to do with that. Also, you know, that perhaps I don't know, I haven't thought about that properly. But yeah, thanks for the question Jason.

45:44 Jason Allen-Paisant

Well, that's deeply fascinating. That the idea of the space of, you know, the poem as being a sort of like, a bit some sort of visual representation of holding, you know, migration and what sort of space we can hold both culturally and mentally. Yes. So I'm Yeah, I think.

46:18 Mina Gorji

What space we can hold and the time, you know the space of yeah, there's a kind of sticking together in the family, or in a small community and not spreading out in a certain way, when you first come to a place I think, and I don't know, I'm wondering about when you can relax enough to put your roots down into a new place, you know, when you can feel rooted in a different way in another country? Yeah, I mean, the seeds that come here from all over the world, they root here, too, you know, but when what for a person when they can feel part of the soil, part of the place, part of the ecosystem? Yeah, I don't know. So maybe that's, maybe it takes a little bit longer?

47:11 Jason Allen-Paisant

I wonder how how time comes into that for you?

47:18 Mina Gorji

Yeah, how time comes in,

47:20 Jason Allen-Paisant

you know, into this issue of roots, which you did a wonderful series of declensions on this idea of roots at the beginning, you know, as it relates to the migratory experience and roots in that sense, I wondered how we might think time.

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47:45 Mina Gorji

Yeah. How long it takes to root how deep? Yeah, I mean, I haven't, that's a good question. Oh, I suppose I was interested in how over a very long space of time, the roots are stranger than you think. And things are more connected and entangled, maybe than we might have thought. And that, you know, thing that looks like displacement might not be displacement. And the thing that looks like out of place might not be if we look at it differently. So that's why I was interested in the shifting timescales. I know, you talked about time too and the feeling, I was interested to hear more about what you were saying about the experience of the body. And in time, you talked about that in one of your poems, the feeling of the bodies in the context of history and the different rhythms of time.

48:58 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yeah, well, I think about, I think about that devastating founding experience of slavery and that displacement that takes place as a result of the slave trade and slavery and, and all of that, how that entrains certain relationships to time, and certain difficult, difficult relationships and complex relationships to time. There was a\$ a you know, a lot of a lot of questing, a lot of searching. But there's also attempts to recreate certain rhythms of time that might have been been lost, you know, ancestral rhythms, with even within the framework of enslavement, we mustn't forget that as well. And all of those, you know, the rituals, ceremonies, the, just the traditions that

50:11 Mina Gorji

You mean go further back, that go further back, you mean from the time of before enslavement, you mean?

50:19 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yes, exactly. So, enslaved, the descendants of enslaved people try to reconnect with the sort of time senses that they might have lost as a result of that, that displacement. So I'm interested in that, because I'm interested in how even our

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relationships to plants and the living world come to play in that as well, in terms of our attempts to preserve or recreate or sort of be back in touch with healing practices with, yeah, just the way we can do, just the way we try to realign our relationship with the living world and, you know, the more than human world.

51:10 Mina Gorji

I mean, it's just thinking about the healing practices, I'm very conscious of, you know, things my parents and grandparents have told me about, you know, healing properties of things and, you know, turmeric or I think coltsfoot it's called, a flower which you know, goes a bit jelly like when you put water in it, or, you know, they very much grew up with this lore, and this relationship with the natural world of thinking about the heat and the cold of different foods and properties, the different yeah, they thought about these powers in the natural world and had ways of living which we're drawing on those traditions, which I tried to, I'm interested in, and I find comforting, I find it very comforting too, yeah.

52:06 Jason Allen-Paisant

Exactly. So there's all of that. Yeah. And there's lots of that where I'm from as well in Jamaica. Yeah. Yeah. But, we, I mean, I've realised we've been talking for a little while, so

52:17 Mina Gorji

I feel it's a nice chat.

52:19 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yeah, it's, I mean, we could go on for much longer. But I should probably read a few more poems, and then turn it over to you to read a few more as well.

52:34 Mina Gorji

Great, sure, I'll read some more. That would be great.

52:38 Jason Allen-Paisant

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All right. Okay. I'm going to read a poem called Walking, walking with the word, walking with the word tree. So Walking with the Word Tree, to have money is to have time, to have time is to have the forest and the trees. I look at my baby mindslicing in the sticky of film of the bud, rubbing her thoughts between fingers, and knowing the purple lips of the involucres in her mouth, and me, am I living my childhood all over again? For her, a wood will not be burned for fire coal where the pigpen is, where you hide from your mama, where you escaped from scolding and rolling eyes, where the puppies live, where the madman lives, where wild animals, stray dogs and the unwanted go to die. And me, am I living my childhood all over again? A child's way of pinching flowers, a child's way of touching buds. But what I had never known, this way of listening to the forest. Did Daisy, Miss Patsy's 11th child and my playmate, even know her name was a flower? In Poros, life was unpastoral. The woodland was there not for living in, going for walks or thinking. Trees were answers to our needs, not objects of desire. woodfire. Catch butterflies along the way to grandmother on the other side of the yam field. Just don't do something foolish like lose the money or take too long so the pot don't cook before daddy reach home. So the pot don't cook before daddy reach home. There's a way of paying attention to plants, a way of listening to trees, a way to hold a flower in your hand. Now that I'm here in a park in England, and I stop when called by the pistils of a tree. There is something in the pink that speaks so clearly to me saying, glad you stopped. I saw you from far away. I don't even know what they call it. But I want to know what it tells me about itself. Its appearance with thousands of others on this tree, that up to April seemed like death. Our parents and grandparents planted yams, potato slips ,reaped tomatoes, carrots, and so on, then market, then money, then food, then clothes, then shoes to go to school. Now I'm practicing a different way of being with the woods. Only, I try not to stray too far from the path. The daisies glitter at my feet. I wanted to show a photo, I forgot about that. Just a photo. It's photo that I took in coffee grove which is a place where it's born in central

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Jamaica, a parish called Manchester and coffee grove is a little hillside district, farming district. And I used to you know, as a kid, I was responsible for bringing the goats to pasture, tying up goats as we say, back home. And that's taken, this photo is taken from the yard, from the property, from the piece of land that is that's ours. You might see in the, it's the blurred background, the blurred part of it, you might see the banana, the banana trees. I don't know if it's probably not big enough for you to see that. It's an image of home. All right. Right now I'm standing beneath what used to be I imagine an impressive tree split down its bole it has sprouted green leaves that will be rustling way into September. At its base lying athwart the clearing is the severed part. The colour of Brown has weathered to near grey, and the footfall of walkers has covered the wood with a layer of dust and yet the part that has fallen among the spikenard and hungry shrubs surges out of death. The raspberries feed on its breath, and beetles thrive in the slurry middle where the bole rots. Listen, there is nothing as exhilarating as the feeling of life coming into you. Though people look suspiciously, stand and listen, do not go anywhere. We have been the workers, just the workers. In the Congo, one man had a land almost 80 times the size of Belgium as his estate. We have been property. When I talk about reclaiming time, I'm just thinking about my body standing in the middle of this woodland and doing nothing. Nothing I think a final one before I hand over to you again Mina. And this one is called Fear of Men. Must we imagine the trees are dark night, the moon lit fields and woodlands, the banana leaves and their bizarre anthropomorphisms? Must we imagine the moon growing full and strolling in the sky? The clouds that suddenly veiled the light covering the earth in darkness. Must we imagine the moment a gust of wind shakes the branches and when awakened out of torpor, a Patoo begins to cry. Must we imagine silhouettes rising gigantic and black, the involuntary step backward from a human shape and the gasp one makes the idea of a duppy? Must we imagine the night and spirits? Must we imagine that because of fear of roaming men more than of duppies, imagining the night is all

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we will do? Do you think I have time for one, one more? Okay, I'll read another one because I realised just looking at the time, Cho-Cho Walks, there is no doing here the only activity is life greedily glutting, assured of its forever self, twigs fall in the silence of Coffee Grove, where hearing is just walking, your shadow blending with those of the vines. Mammy carried a machete in her hand, Spanish bill, to part the succulent weeds to ask them to excuse us. The cutting and digging was for Cocoa yams that we would roast in the afternoon sun. My machete was for feeling grown, a worker whose hands plough the soil. I cannot tell you the delight of coolness, the delight of walking under a cho-cho walk, of hiding for a child, becoming flesh of the flesh of the leaves, walking with caterpillars on all fours, when all we had was a machete, yam sticks and cho-cho walks. The grown up boys had slingshots, made trucks from cardboard juice boxes, and real engineering was to build a handcart. I settled for avocado wagons and cars, avocado men, everything built from an avocado seed. The path that leads back into the cho-cho walk leads through the undergrowth of maple trees in Leeds, the light is different but the same. The setting sun that dapples the leaves is different, but the coolness is almost the same. The bird calls are different but bird calls are nouns and nouns are spirits giving you sounds you need to hear. I'll leave it there over to you now, Mina.

1:02:12 Mina Gorji

Thanks Jason. I was enjoying listening, now to read some few more poems just to tie it together. Well, I was saying earlier, I'm interested in the relationship between nature and native and the plants and creatures which arrive on these shores and are described as alien. And the next poem is about the common dandelion which was carried across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World by settlers. And it was taken as a medicinal plant, dandelion, but it soon spread all the way across North America, where it's known as an invasive species. It's a short poem. Empire of the dandelion, global, puffball, pis-en-lit, priest's halo, sin in the grass, one

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tiny spore proliferates, an empire spread on air -dandelion blown across oceans by ill winds, weed and bitter remedy, chicoria, pissabet, bittera tzelaut. Just thinking in that poem, there are lots of different names in different languages for dandelion. So connecting back to Jason's thinking about names and naming. The next poem I'm going to read is about another immigrant species. This is an oak gall wasp. I wanted to imagine how it was for this tiny immigrant arriving in this country emerging into English light. They were brought here to serve us these tiny creatures, brought here for their gall. The little galls which grow on these specific oak trees which were ground up to make ink. Wasp, the Wasp who makes no honey gave us ink. In early spring oak galls appear, darkening in autumn they gestate. Emerging into English light, this tiny emigrant was smuggled in Aleppo oak - an alien acorn. So many creatures migrate to these shores every year and I wanted to think about the movements of people as part of a larger pattern of movement across time and across seasons. I wanted to think about these at the same scale and the next poem is the opening poem of my new collection and it opens up into exilic space. A red door opens into snow. What to leave behind? A bangle, gold, a pearl, an offering for the threshold left behind. I recently went to a wonderful bird sanctuary at Welney in Norfolk and I saw the gathering of swans there. The local mute swans in their hundreds, alongside the migrant Whooper swans with their yellow and black bills, the Buick swans that usually make their way to these shores hadn't arrived this year, perhaps because of changes to the temperature and their food sources on the usual route. And also, unfortunately, because their migration lines crossed several countries where Swan hunting is a sport. This is a poem about another local bird, like the Mute Swan, you can hear it if you're lucky, in the reedbeds around Cambridge. But although they're native to these islands, they're also described in the Old Testament. So I suppose I felt a kind of kinship with this bird, the bittern, a bird which lives in the Middle East where I was born, and near Cambridge, where I live now. Bittern. It thrives in brackish water, where the sea

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has broken in, in marshes and on riverbanks, edges of solid ground. When danger comes, it imitates the reeds, sticking its head up straight and swaying in the wind. A nervous bird more often heard than seen. Its hollow boom was heard at night in ancient times. In Nineveh and Babylon. I don't know if I've got time for a couple more. If I do, I've got I've got another Babylonian poem which I'm just trying to find. Just coming up a poem that, this is a poem called *Tinnitus in Nineveh*, it's a poem linking back to that ancient time. *Tinnitus in Nineveh*. The library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh held many remedies. If the hands of a ghost seize a man and his ears sing or whisper, stuff them with charms, fumigate with roo or frankincense, find a blacksmith or a poet, to distract the mat with clang of metal striking metal chisel striking stone. This last poem I'm going to read is about a different kind of writing, much more ephemeral writing, not the top stone tablets that have survived. But the writing that pink foot geese make when they fly in formation, across the skies, arriving here on the coast of Norfolk, coming in to land from Iceland every autumn. I think they're probably heading back north roundabout now. At the edge of England, dusk across the sky, V, M, W, M, V, I, more foreign than Icelandic runes, the skein of geese is spelling out a sacred, a secret song. Like sacred script, I couldn't understand or sound and if I mouthed it wrong, she pinched my hand and then the sky calls out a wild familiar cry reminding us not to despair. Our fears are only wintering, like letters disappearing into sky. Thanks very much. There was a bit of a, I got I tripped a bit on the Secret Sacred.

1:10:30 Olivia Aherne

Thank you so much Mina and Jason too for these beautiful readings and reflections. It's just been such a pleasure to sit back and listen to you both. I have some questions that I wanted to ask you both. But we also have questions from our audiences. So I thought I'd just field those first. And a quick reminder to anyone that's watching. If you have any last minute thoughts or things that you wanted to pose to both Jason or Mina, please just pop that in the chat. But to

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start us off, we have a question from Rose Tortie, which is a question to both of you. And they asked, What do you hope is the impact of your writing on the world? Do you see it as a part of a social or artistic movement? And she also says, thank you both, it was really amazing.

1:11:29 Jason Allen-Paisant

I'm happy to give my thoughts if Yeah. Social or aristic, I think it's a bit of both, it's both for me, I really hope that my my art could help be part of some communal community, creation of community. And therefore a social space, so that it could bring together people around the thinking about ecology and how we live in relation to the living world. I think I mean, pedagogy and teaching is often you know, this is kind of perhaps a kind of dry kind of term, very often it seems alienated from, from the, from poetry or, you know, at least that's how it's presented. But I really think that learning together is one of the things that's central to my, to what I try to do, to what I'm at least proposing through my art, so, so that would bring together bring people together. The political for me, I think, politics, through community, and through sociality, that's my approach to the political because I think that's ultimately how I think thought revolutions will happen. Or at least, you know, it can affect the thinking of some people. Yeah, that's where I see my place. I don't know. What's your take on on the issue, Mina?

1:13:51 Mina Gorj

Well, yeah, I mean, I think I would like my poems to have some kind of restorative effect and to encourage people to connect to what's precious and the energies of the world around them, to tune in to the frequencies of where we're standing and be in the world, I think and to recognise that in language we have a precious place to be as well and that so to think about those connections and the richness of the world around us, I mean, it sounds I mean, you know, I really think especially at times of conflict, at times of suffering, the solace of what the earth can offer us and of what the language can offer us is very

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important and the comfort of it, it's not to say that the poems are always comforting, but there's something a place to be, and a place that reminds us of our place too and to think about that, I hope, well, they will do.

1:15:19 Olivia Aherne

Perhaps just as a kind of follow up comment from that, you know, so many, so many of your poems and texts from both of you centre sort of nature as a space from which to learn and listen and think and, Jason in one of the poems you shared, you say, the landscape within me, and I just wondered if kind of a follow up question might be, if you could talk a bit about the relations of nature and a kind of writing from or writing with, rather than a writing about?

1:15:53 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yeah. Well, so much of the, my work is thinking about the writing, what happens when you place your body into the space? What does that sensual connection generate? You know? And it's, I think, I don't have a very articulated answer to the question, but writing from spaces, and seeing the places that we write about, as you know, that those somatic connections as really being part of our bodies, really being part of us. And I suppose the message is there, that art, and this kind of poetry is also about the body, I think that's really where it lies, I think that's the point, that writing about nature, quote, unquote, is also writing about the body. And thinking about thinking about the body, and in all the ways, in all the different ways that we can do that, not obstructing the body, but really seeing it as a part of the ecology that we are writing about. So we're writing about ourselves, in writing about mushrooms, and the whole lot, and you know, all of that. And it's that ethical connection about what is what's the status of being a body then in the world? So I think if the poetry has any power, it's also about thinking about poetry through that lens, that is a kind of thing that puts us into this haptic sense connection with our bodies and the responsibilities that we have, that that entrains and if that can be passed on, if that

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can somehow be transmitted through the work, possibly, you know, that can be the most powerful thing.

1:19:08 Olivia Aherne

Yeah. We have a couple of questions from Helena Hunter. First off Mina, can you talk more about writing with scale and how this operates perhaps as a methodology in your work? And to Jason, thinking, writing, being with trees, where has this taken you with your writing? What might you have learnt from trees? How may they have shaped or shifted your work?

1:19:42 Mina Gorji

Yeah, I'm well, scale is really the thing which is, has been structuring my thinking over the past couple of years when I've been pulling together the poems for this collection, and I've been very conscious of, I suppose shrinking of the world during lockdown, and the way things became smaller and our desire for things to be bigger. And so at some level, that's to do with it, but also, you know, the way that our imaginations can take us. Transcend scales, move between scales. So I try to move, to write poems which were exploring things at different scales, so millipedes, or little tiny insects, but also constellations in space, planets, and to put the poems in juxtaposition in the collection, so that the reader gets the experience of shifting scales like that a little bit. And some of the poems do that within them, move between huge and tiny, often, but also temperature scales, I'm very interested in kind of shifts, tiny, you know, the incremental shifts in temperature, which we know, are going to have a huge impact on our place in the world, these tiny, you know, how is it to understand that scale in our, how is it to understand that tiny scale, which is such an important, which is so important? So how, so trying, so I'm trying to think across different scales of space, but also of temperature, tiny scales of hot and cold, and also shades of colour scales. So I'm really interested in kinds of chromatography and trying to see what you know, I didn't know if you did that in school where you put the ink and it's separated out into all its constituent colours up the blotting

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paper, I don't know if you did that. But the tiny, the breaking down of things into a kind of scale, wider scale. So what looked like it was dark blue ink opens into something much more varied and colourful, so I was interested in those tiny shifts like that, to see how much space and how much colour and how much variety there was in something that looked like a small singular thing that it could open out and be a much more capacious thing, in a way, so maybe that's partly an invitation to see things in their richness and their fullness and not just, yeah, so maybe there's some kind of, I don't know, it's not politics, but invitation to explore the generosity of things like by understanding how, if we see them in that way, on different scales, they open up and are so much more than they seem. So yeah, I kinda so I was interested in that. And the way we adapt to different scales, how human beings are resilient and can adapt to different scales of temperature, for example, or different, you know, what, just to think about that, as well. And I was fascinated by the creatures that can live in these extreme conditions, like at the bottom of the Arctic, or at the vents of submarine volcanoes at extremely hot and extremely cold conditions, so in these terrible conditions, you know, life is possible, that, you know, things are able to survive at these extreme scales. So, what's the scale at which we can survive and thrive? What animal's life? And also, yeah, at what scale, at what scale does it cease to matter? What national boundaries cease to matter? What scale does the nation seems to matter? What scale when we look at ourselves in the world that we, are we at home in it and not part of a smaller configuration on a map, for example? So I'm thinking about scales of belonging, also. So I don't know if that answers your question, but those were the things I was interested in, and those were the questions which were coming up to me when I wrote the poems I tried to articulate and work through and I don't know, I hope the poems do that a little bit. Thanks for the question.

1:24:31 Jason Allen-Paisant

Yeah. The question for me was about what? What lessons I've

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I've learned from trees, was that it?

1:24:44 Olivia Aherne

Yeah, so thinking, writing, being with trees. Where has this taken you with your writing? What might you have learned from trees and how may they have shaped or shifted your work?

1:24:58 Jason Allen-Paisant

Well, it's well, it's shifted my work in first of all in that I've begun to think about thinking so much, which I never used to do before. And also secondly, I've begun to think about poetry so much, and what poetry is, and how I am and can be involved in it. That you know, the different forms that it takes. And it's all because you know, if trees send so much energy to us, and if they you know, if we can hear and feel things that can't be put into words, then I've been thinking that it reframes, it reframes this business of thinking, as you know, as something that involves only our agency alone. You know, this, and that, and the sense of rational control. So that it perhaps, creates a space for sounds and soundings and vibrations, which are felt, which are the felt, which you know, that's the felt thing. And perhaps, we might be able to teach, and learn and share more around sound, and vibrations. And that might generate a different experiences of love. But not in, not love in a wishy washy, sentimentalist sense. But you know, that deep sense of, that deep sense of politics of love, which I think is the most important politics for the current time. Yes, I think, I think trees entrain in my mind, this sense of the possibility of affect, having a more, a bigger place in how we share, and learn and think. And of course, affect goes beyond languages. It exceeds, articulate, articulated language, and rational control. But we all feel it. And we all know, we all know that it's there. And we all can relate. We all know about the energies that affect produces. But it can't be mapped and controlled in a rationalist sense, but But I suppose, yeah, there needs to be, I would think, thinking about, about the felt aspect of thinking, if that makes sense,

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the felt, the energy of thinking as opposed to the abstract cognitive rationality of thinking.

1:28:26 Olivia Aherne

Thank you. I'm conscious of time. But before we wrap up, I just want to say a huge thank you again to you both for so generously sharing your work, but also for joining in in conversation and engaging our audiences. It's been such a pleasure. And I'd also like to quickly thank Sarah and Linda as well for their collaboration, developing the event and also to my colleagues, Jim, Helen and Catherine for their support. A word of thank you as well to Nottingham Trent University, and the University of Nottingham for supporting our events. And finally, I'd just like to invite you all to the next Five Bodies live reading, which will take place on Thursday, the 14th of April, and we'll be joined by artist and poet Rindon Johnson, alongside critical theorist and filmmaker Elizabeth Povinelli. So I hope to see you all then. But a huge thanks again Jason and Mina.

1:29:30 Jason Allen-Paisant

Thanks, Olivia for organising and the entire team behind it. Thanks so much.

Colophon

Curators: Olivia Aherne, Sarah Jackson and Dr. Linda Kemp

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