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Channelling Queer Depths: An Evening with Poet Shivane Ramlochan

KEYWORDS

poems, writing, queer, thinking, trinidad, people, indenture, feel, caribbean, suppose, poetry, talking, book, question, Nottingham, wondered, lesbian, Sylvia Plath, subterranean, queerness

SPEAKERS

Tom Lockwood-Moran, Shivane Ramlochan, Josh Lockwood-Moran, Philippa Douglas

Philippa Douglas 00:03

Hello, everyone. Welcome to Channeling Queer Depths and evening with poet Shivane Ramlochan. Just a reminder before we get started that tonight's talk is free for everyone but if you do enjoy the work we do, please do consider supporting Nottingham Contemporary by making a small one off donation on your way out. My name is Philippa Douglas. I'm the Assistant Curator of live programs here at Nottingham Contemporary before introducing Shivane. I'd like to share some brief housekeeping notes with you. Our live programs open up different interventions and propositions within research across the organization. Although we will keep an informal atmosphere throughout the evening. Our talks performances and screenings seek to create challenging environments where open mindedness and respect for each other's approaches and perspectives can foster growth, so please be mindful and respectful of each other's opinions and views. I would also like to take this opportunity to show gratitude to the University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University as well as acknowledging my colleagues,

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Canan Batur, Andy Batson, Jim Brouwer, Tom Chamberlain and Millie Quick for making this event possible today. So without further delay, I'm delighted to introduce Shivane Ramlochan. Shivane is an Indo-Trinidadian poet, critic and essayist whose first poetry collection *Everyone Knows I Am A Haunting* was shortlisted for the 2018 Forward Prize. Shivane's next work the creative nonfiction *Unkillable* is forthcoming from Noemi Press in autumn 2023. Tonight she will give readings from her groundbreaking collection *Everyone Knows I Am A Haunting*, followed by a conversation with PhD queer literary researcher Tom Lockwood Moran. Tom is a PhD researcher funded by Midlands4Cities writing his thesis in English Literature entitled *Queer Resistance(s): Contemporary Caribbean Communitarity*. Tom's project is supervised by experts from both Nottingham Trent University and the University of Leicester. It's my pleasure to welcome you both and have you with us this evening. This event is partnered with formations program at Bonnington gallery and on that note, I'm now going to hand over to Josh to say a few words before we begin.

Josh Lockwood-Moran 02:03

Thank you very much Philippa. My name is Josh Lockwood Moran and the assistant curator at Bonnington Gallery, which is part of Nottingham Trent University. Thank you for Nottingham Contemporary for hosting for letting us host this event. Today with us. This event is part of our formations program, which is a series of public events focused on global inequalities. This program is organized in collaboration between Bonnington gallery and Nottingham Trent University's Postcolonial Research Centre led by Jenni Ramone and Nicole Thiara. All our events are recorded and available to watch on our Bonnington Galleries YouTube channel. Back in February Shivane and Tom had a conversation as well so please, if you enjoyed tonight, check that out as well. We also have a writing workshop with Shivane tomorrow evening at Bonnington gallery. And there are two places left for that. So sign up if you haven't already. And I will hand over to Shivane and Tom.

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Thank you.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 03:09

Thank you. Hi, everyone. Can everyone hear me? I'm always a bit like anxious with mics. Hi. Hello, everyone. Hi, Shivanee. It's really great to have you all here. And also just a big welcome to Nottingham. This is your first time in Nottingham? And we've spent a bit of the day together today already, and we've seen the show upstairs, and this what we'll be thinking through and kind of talking with Shivanee today is subterranean imaginary to do with upstairs, but also to do with thinking through about, like underground underneath subcultures subversions, within your work. And I wondered if you wanted to say hello.

Shivanee Ramlochan 03:55

Hello, everyone.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 03:57

And I guess, to begin, because what the structure of this event is going to be we're going to have a little talk now discussion, and then we're going to hear from Shivanee is going to read a poem for us. And then we'll just go back to discussion and poem discussion poem. And we're really fortunate because Shivanee is gonna be sharing some work at the end, which is brand new. Yep. But we haven't got to engage with what no one's got to engage with before and I'm really excited. As I'm sure you are. So, I just wanted to start, I guess thinking through queerness in this space, what we mean or what maybe what you think of in terms of queerness for yourself and your writing.

Shivanee Ramlochan 04:47

Thank you for that question. You know, being queer in the Caribbean is an interesting proposition. It's kind of like shape shifting. I'm not able to be queer in the same way at home, which is in Trinidad and Tobago, as I am, when I'm here, it's kind of like you go through an involuntary sea change when

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you cross the Atlantic, and you are suddenly in a place, similar to when I'm in the States, where the facts of my body, and my poetry and my self are more palatable to a wider range of people or people just don't care, which is also quite freeing. At home, it feels every time that I return to this place that I love where I live, where I've always lived, it kind of feels like you inhabit a wrong sided time machine always going back in time. I mean, with that said, a couple of years ago, Trinidad finally struck down its post colonial laws governing sodomy, which we inherited, thanks to a former colonizer right here. And it was, as a queer person who's lived her whole life in the Caribbean, it was extraordinary. But it was also terrifying, because it was that feeling of what are you going to do if they take it away? What if it's a trick? What if it's a joke, and it's really lovely to see younger queer people, the generation just below me kind of enter into this world where this is something that has always felt possible for them. And I think I work very hard to access some of that joy, which I hope comes through in the poems. Yeah, I think joy is something that, queer joy is something that's very powerful. I suppose when we're thinking about what queerness is, we are thinking about LGBT people. But also, beyond that, I suppose there's an element of nonconformity and do you find that thinking or imagining your queer self in writing. Do you find that that gives you a sense of an outlet in the Caribbean? Or do you feel do you feel like there's a connection or some sort of kind of underground almost, I was thinking, I don't know, it makes me think of like tunnels, you know, tunnels of connection between people that have to do with feeling in terms of coding? Do you do that? Or do you find that in your work, and writing? Thank you for that. I feel that on the page before, anywhere else is where it was first able to be fully myself. So not just in the fact of my queerness. But in the fact of my weirdness, my nonconformity, my fatness, my confused relationship with faith, I am in writing this book, which is now astonishingly five years old. I determined pretty early on that, if nowhere else, but on the page, I would tell a certain kind of truth, which has a lot to do with the idea of the subterranean, like what is truth

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beneath the accepted truth? I kind of liken it to, you know, we're all sitting at a dining room table. And on the surface of the table with a clean linen tablecloth, everything seems fine. And you're having a lovely conversation with your family over Christmas dinner, but under the table, there's tentacles and fangs, and there's the world of the unsaid and you know, when you all know, sitting there, that there's shit you're never going to talk about, but everyone knows, and you will choke with like, the pain and the trauma of not being able to voice some of that, but it will never get said. And it's like, well, the poems can concentrate on that. And if I go through the rest of my life, not being able to see things as me, then whoever embodies the poems can do that work. And maybe I will inherit some bravery that way.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 09:23

I think the idea of like, gonna move on to Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting because like you're saying everyone knows there's stuff that you're not talking about. Everybody knows. And there's something underneath that almost feels mythical as in, like, that you can't access that and bring it to the forefront and moving into kind of your first reading, I wondered if we could think about maybe afterwards what invoking kind of mythical creatures does, or are they mythical? You know, like, what's folkloric and traditional? Who's to say that these aren't real and you're bringing them to the surface? So, yeah.

Shivane Ramlochan 10:10

So, this poem is called Duenne Lara. Duenne's in Trinidadian folklore are the spirits of unbaptized children who live on the periphery of the forest. And they're kind of used as a precautionary tale to children who were told to behave themselves or a duenne will come to get them and drag them into the woods to live there forever. They wear straw hats that conceal most of their faces, and their feet are turned backwards, like so. So their heels point in that direction. And I am I spent a lot of time when I was young, wondering if a duenne would visit me. They never did. I'm still not baptized,

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who knows it might happen. But the three duan poems in the collection, and I think they think about what would one see if they could speak for themselves? Do they have their own stories to tell? Are they really evil? Little children? Or are they scared? What do they want and who do they love? So the duans in this collection are all siblings. And this is the middle child. Duenne Laura. If I write into you hard enough, the rumor murmurs that you'll come for me. If I scratch you, through the water mirror, suck you under my talons, Will you knock and claim me? I keep this one soft garden. In my trachea vacant. I stripped speech for split gourds choking on seeds so you might come live in me, little lover, come claim these metatarsal prayers. Everyone knows I am a haunting. Enact it again, you whisper, using mora and purpleheart to tell me. Mourn me all over cloister to caul. Weep me upright in our wedding bower, my little bride, and I do, I do. I take the four rivers of the forest by throat an algal sinew, pump the waters into my lungs. Come, I'll christen you away from the devil's doorstep, duenne suitor, duenne savior, duenne dowry, duenne you are mine by sharp incense and pistol recoil, by moth fabric and mouth to mouth. The wooden atlas delivers deeper rings in us while the devil tries again to win your heart, grinning. Come here, she marrow bites. I have something for you, but it looks like torture. She scrapes it from the ruins of the moonlight museum. She smiles as it eats our national anthem from your tongue. No one told you how it would hurt to have your feet forced against family hearth. The mangroves stroked you taut while the devil cracked your bones right, a blister body of devotion. A casket of cunning charms to stamp you for her service. I will never make you walk again, if you will be mine.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 14:28

Yeah, thank you. Thank you. That was really stunning. I think we were talking about this before. I really enjoy a title drop. So Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting to be saying Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting. Within that poem, do you see and feel is that as much as there's a poetic voice is that also your

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voice? It almost feels with the duenne like you're invoking them like you want them because I maybe feel like they're terrifying. But I want them, you know? I want them. And you were talking about kind of being a child and and them taking you away as a queer child growing up in Trinidad, did you feel as though there could be an element of kind of the other side that would welcome you? Because for me, I've always thought of it in like a very white British way, like early modern changelings, and that's the way that's what it made me think of that, like, maybe that there's someone who can take me away and make me a fairy, you know, or fairier. So, yeah, I wondered how that worked for you. Did you see something that's supposed to be scary as a potential escape?

Shivane Ramlochan 15:50

Yes, I mean, the big joke is that I'm really frightened of horror films but but I realize that there's a lot of supernatural, mystical mythical elements in my work. And like most children of the postcolonial empire, we grew up on a lot of British myths. My parents maybe more so than me, but I mean, I was surrounded by Enid Blyton books, I studied Keats and Shelley, for English literature. I mean, it was never far from these emblems of very conventional symbolism. But, you know, within that mostly white male canon, I hunted for the fantastical. For the poems that spoke about spirits in a way human children, and goblin markets, and then all of that. And when I started that long process of unlearning colonial damage, I allowed myself to go into my own Caribbean archives, which previously, I'd scorned because of the associations of it being inferior. And found there was a wealth there to hold me. And the things that are often taught to children as frightening or punitive, can actually be quite welcoming to those who have no other spaces on which to find themselves.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 17:13

Yeah, I think there's something really important in that those being taught a certain variation of literature, or whatever that

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is, is that still the same in Trinidad at the moment, in terms of curriculum?

Shivane Ramlochan 17:28

It's hard to get away from Shakespeare, I think, I don't know that we ever really will. But there's much more variety now than there ever was. But I suppose there's those kinds of unusual or strange, maybe uncanny aspects that are drawn, you're drawn to as you were talking about, Goblin Market. And I suppose there's like, there's a really big I love that poem in terms of like a lesbian tension. Yeah. And so there's often a queer coded threat, but that's probably based on something older, longer and wiser, like what you're bringing through with the duenne. I feel like lesbian tension can be my codename. I live for little bit of lesbian tension. You know, I didn't think of myself as a lesbian for a long time, I suppose I still don't. I think I exist somewhere on that strange queer gradient that doesn't really want a name but knows it's not straight. Just because straightness was so often associated with all the things I feared most with the patriarchy, with a really punishing kind of justice handed down by men. I think it's no coincidence that the men that I fear the most are Indo Caribbean men, whether they're real people in my extended family, or archetypes. And it's because these are the figures who represented this kind of incarnate violence to me, as a child growing up in rural Trinidad, these are the men I saw, like, stumbling out of village bars, and my family owned such a bar. So I saw this all the time and the men I saw, beating their wives and the men I saw being taken back by those wives, who are still covered like in bruises, and so the Indian man in my poems doesn't get off easily. But I've been trying a lot to figure out where that comes from, and whether or not that is a well of trauma I can ever write through. And now with a new poem is what is on the other side of that, how has the Indo Caribbean man suffered himself and then how is his body and his mind in the sight of active trauma?

Tom Lockwood-Moran 19:46

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Yeah, that kind of violence begets violence. There's a darkness that begets darkness. And I suppose, even when we're thinking about as queer people drawn towards this variation of darkness, your there's a romanticization of it, which I think is really beautiful in your work with duenne particularly. But also I suppose when you invoke classical mythology, there's there's something dangerous, romantic, but also really visceral, in terms of the pain that might be behind that, do you? And this isn't like you were talking about putting yourself or a poetic voice that is kind of your most villainous or the darkest, the most underneath? Do you think you could? Do you think you will be able to do that? Or do you think that's for your poems to kind of write against?

Shivane Ramlochan 20:44

That's a great question. I am never always too sure who is speaking through me, or what the poems intend to do until they do it to me, which sounds like a little bit like an exorcism. Like things in this collection that I've tried to run away from writing, but poems are this force that won't really let you sleep. And so the more I tried to resist some of this telling, the more it pursued me, particularly I think the poems about sexual violence. And, in fact, sharing those poems, after the book was published have been some of the most intense and community building, including queer community, experiences of my life, because you write, one writes, in a kind of isolation with all your attendant demons. And then I didn't think too much about what it would be like to read the work in public until I started reading work in public. And there were people in audiences like me, Indo Caribbean, women, and girls and non binary people, much of them closeted in Caribbean space, who would come up to me afterwards and say that they felt a part of something they hadn't been a part of before. And what I realized is that I too, was invited to be part of this invisible space in which we could all be maybe subterranean, but seen by each other, in the darkness, and that that darkness can be a gift.

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Tom Lockwood-Moran 22:28

Yeah, yeah, that's really true. I think there's something that I suppose even within what's correspondence and our friendship, where all of our stuff that's kind of there's there's there's something underneath no matter how kind of far apart you might be geographically or even how people might see you. Beyond that, I guess, if they're thinking or looking at identity markers that actually queerness in and of itself, tend to try and go past anything to do with identity, troublingly and to do with it can be contentious, but that it's about connecting beyond those things, and I suppose you sharing that amount of your other side, I guess, too, ostensibly strangers, I suppose when you wrote, did you think about kind of strangers resonating with your work? Because like Oh, can you not do that as part of the practice?

Shivaneer Ramlochan 23:30

It's interesting, I feel like the poem is again about sexual violence I wrote because there was nowhere else to put them. I couldn't speak the truth of them to anyone who I thought would be able to receive them. I couldn't. I was spending so much time and compressing myself as a human being into spaces to be palatable, to be thought of as obedient and docile and acceptable. I certainly couldn't start talking about rape in the Caribbean, in polite society. And I don't know if I had an ideal reader, I just felt desperate to communicate the essential truth that this kind of violence is systemic, it is domestic it is it whereas all kinds of deceptive faces and it happens, it is happening all the time. And it was truly humbling to begin to see a response to that, that involved community. Both communities I have felt a part of and also a part. And, you know, often when you share work about sexual violence, you it is hard to evade the question. Did this happen to you, which I always find to be a difficult thing to answer though I understand the places where it comes from. So a lot of just the practice of living with the work in the world has been about making space for other people to share how they are moved or troubled by it, and knowing what parts of

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yourself need to remain subterranean, what parts of your own privacy or sovereignty you what will you guard, while you also lead yourself really for, for someone else to witness?

Tom Lockwood-Moran 25:30

Yeah, no. That makes a lot of sense, especially in terms of what you're talking about with. Is the is this you? That question that everybody is kind of the go to. Is this you? Who was this voice? Even as kind of a literary research, it's like, was the political persona, what are they doing? What's happening? I guess, when there's, how much of your life is put into it is actually private, you know, and poetry or your poetic expression doesn't have to do that. And maybe it doesn't need to be questioned, which is something as we move on to the next reading, that I think is interesting to think about, like you're saying, you know, there's, you don't think of yourself in any way shape or form as lesbian. But there may be is this lesbian tension?

Shivaneer Ramlochan 26:22

Get a t shirt that says lesbian tension.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 26:24

Lesbian tension. Just to create that.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 26:28

If we started a band called lesbian tension, would you join us, please? Yeah, I want this for us.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 26:32

Yeah, I think I've got lesbian tension written all over me. Yeah. That will be the next event introducing lesbian tension. That will go down really well, especially with me.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 26:51

This poem is the oldest poem and the book was written in my early 20s, which I'm a state I'm decidedly far from now. And it's, you know, when you look at your old work, and you

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think, Oh, God, would never write a poem like this again. But actually, I was telling Tom this before the reading that I look at this poem now. And I feel immense gratitude to the young woman that I was then for daring to write it at 21 or 22, which is now more than 10 years ago, this was nothing I was daring to say to anyone. The really baby step beginnings of trying to figure out where to put my queer desire, where I will be safe, putting it and, importantly, would I do it if I couldn't be safe, to which the answer turned out to be yes. Good Names For Three Children. Do not go into the dark alone. Hold my hand. I don't care if it embarrasses you. Or makes you fret. Squirm. Like you were trying to crawl out of your own skin. You pull away and slice me across my achilles heels. Three years later, you will fling yourself from me into the grinning gamble of oncoming traffic. And your years of being carried will rush up like starving orphans to kiss your palms. To not go into the dark alone. Remember your right to use it. Your voice your arms, your high street San Fernando desire for the girl with an orange blossom tucked behind her ear. Do not wake. Sleep ransacked. Bleary eyed with a frauds tears feeling filthy, for the way you love. The how the who? The where? I cradled your strong limbs in my belly. And they tapped out against my bones the morse code of your whole life. Remember your right to use it. Do not forget the dead. They sit at your table to stave off food poisoning. They have caught your infant from the clutches of a fumbling man you are poised in every instant over the fertile graves of millions. Nothing will erase your mother's smile, the gate swinging open as you step off the school bus, the tug in your chest a sea swell as you swim always towards your first love. Do not forget the dead. Corinne. Morrow, evening Thank you. Thank you.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 30:26

Thank you. That was really it's amazing. I had no idea that that was the one of the first poems that you'd Well, the first poem, probably that you'd read the, the oldest in this collection is when my words of trying to go

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Shivane Ramlochan 30:36

Yes, almost didn't make it in here. I was when, you know, it came down to selecting the chronology of poems that just went you know, to my eye, it just really stuck out it was so disparate from what I was trying to write 10 years after, but I thought it's not fair to that poet, to that person, that self to conceal something so important, just because I think now it's less polished or less sophisticated? I don't know,

Tom Lockwood-Moran 31:12

No, I do that. I think maybe that there's some, there's some form of connection that speaks out a bit easier, or a bit, a bit more a bit with a bit more vulnerability, perhaps. I guess there's also like I was talking about just before this, it was reminding me of kind of Shani Mootoo, Out on Main Street, this kind of I was gonna say, again, lesbian tention, this kind of this kind of underneath or underside to whatever's going on. And here, kind of linking that with the dead. And thinking about the other side. I know we were talking about this earlier, because I was like, ah, it was every time I was reading or thinking about this poem, I was going back to Antoinette Wide Sargasso Sea. And that catch all phrase that I think I say to myself probably like once a month, just in a really like, really loads of gravitas. Like there's always the other side. Always. And I wondered in this, there's so much of the, quite obviously of the dead, but also of the new birth coming through. That is the other side. And is that other side? The people who came before and the people who come after you always are they writing with you? Do you think that you're writing through that? Or do you think that this is just you in this particular moment? Do you think you're already writing this for your future self?

Shivane Ramlochan 32:48

Thank you for that. I am. I mean, as far as I know, mono racial by ancestry, which is an interesting thing. 100% ostensibly, my ancestors came from the Indian subcontinent as indentured laborers to Trinidad. Which is I think some people racists

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might think of as a point of pride. To me, it's always been interesting, because there is no mixing as far as I'm aware. But what that means is that I've thought a lot about the Indian woman who made my blood line where it is what they would have given up to cross the ocean. That journey was called crossing the kala pani, which means black water in Hindi, to a world they knew nothing about carrying as much of their traditions as they could with them, escaping really uncertain fates. I mean, indenture was by no means slavery, but neither was it loves your Yes. And a lot of the journeys of indenture happened through manipulation and coercion, the promise of a life that was posed to be markedly better in the West Indies, but was not. And so how many of these women had stories to tell that were submerged, suffused, made subterranean? Not by choice. How could I ever think, in some kind of vanity or hubris that where I write from comes from nothing, but I was the originator of it? Maybe I used to think that way, which I think is fine. I think it's a belief of emotional and literal youth to hold on to that. When I started to examine my traditions, both the ones that I loved and the ones that made me profoundly uncomfortable. I started thinking a lot about these stories I would never have access to and for better or worse, I've inherited a great deal from my indo Caribbean ancestry, language, religion, ritual, type two diabetes. The good and the bad and all of it. And part of that must be stories waiting to be exhumed. And I might never get close to knowing when my grandmother, a great, great grandmother, or the first woman of my line, thought of, but if I could think about that for the rest of my life and be with that, then that will be, I think, some of the most important work I could be doing.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 35:27

Yeah, I think that that comes through this. What would be? What would I be thinking through with that? I don't know that there was a word that someone used to describe your work that I was like, that's really good. But it would just meant lots of voices, which is what it actually means, like multi phonic or something, you know, we were discussing this

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earlier, like the, for all intents and purposes, just wackiness of literary criticism in those terms, but that multi chorus, maybe, like a chorus of people with you. And something that was quite interesting, actually, was when I was thinking of when I started writing on your work. And I was thinking and putting you your work and thinking, what's it going to go together? Not together with but where does it connect? It was Staceyann Chin have technically no kind of sameness. Yeah, you know, like there's no community based on sameness, what what you're connecting through is a difference. And I wondered whether it's the same cycle breaking different difference women who are part of that lineage, and that they also would have had those cycle breakers informing them. So you're kind of giving a literary presence now. But does it? Does it feel? Do you feel tender towards them? Or do you feel angry? Or if those kinds of people come up for you, though, it's maybe maybe it's too personal? Yeah, I have to answer that if you don't want to.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 37:04
Are you trying to create lesbian tension?

Tom Lockwood-Moran 37:07
I think I already have, just with myself. I feel very lesbian and very tense.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 37:18
It's a very, it's a very fraught relationship with the ancestors, particularly the men of my family line. And also, I don't want to say that the more I write, the more I wonder whether or not writing against the patriarchy can become a kind of crutch. Like if it's a crutch, I kind of I think I've worn it out of necessity. But again, talking about what is on the underside of the people who perpetrate greed, violence, how to do that kind of work without sympathizing with violent, perpetration. is that a word? Violent violentness. But also making the fact that everyone under indenture suffered everyone under the postcolonial projects of the empire, empires suffered

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admit I was wrong about that shocked me and then confront me, confront myself. And I think if you, this is what I think if I'm not prepared to enact the greatest difficulties of the work upon myself, I can't visit it on anyone else. Yeah. So we can put anyone through narratively or symbolically anything in a poem I wasn't willing to go through. I think that's only fair.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 40:19

Yeah, absolutely. But I also think there's something in that when you create all these voices, and a story that is just yours, but has so many different branches of stories. What it does is show that history is just a story is just one version or learned history is a version of one focus of events from his perspective in the name, isn't it his story, that whole that that old, kind of where you're, and I guess it's from where you're looking at that history, that it becomes, if you're looking at it from below, you're seeing a very you can see it as one story and you need in order to to proliferate those voices. I guess there needs to be a number of those, but they're still you, but not you, I guess. And with that we'll move towards this is the brand that can be brand new poetry. Is this okay? Yes. Yeah. This. So you wrote was this one that you wrote, for the Plath fest?

Shivaneer Ramlochan 41:22

Yeah, so I went to the Sylvia Plath Literary Festival last month. And one thing they did was to commission a series of poems from participating writers for anthology called *After Sylvia*. And the book is roughly divided into four segments, each of which has a theme, the theme I was broadly responding to was rebirth. I have a complicated relationship with Sylvia Plath when I was 16, or so and discovered her poems for the first time, I thought, no one could write like this, I felt, I fell completely in love. And I was obsessed. I used to write her poems out in my notebooks. And I thought this was the pinnacle of what a woman writer could do in poetry. And then, some years after, I read *The Bell Jar*, and I felt profoundly betrayed by Sylvia Plath. For her, what, you know, at the time,

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must have been unexamined casual racism, for misogyny for portrayals of black men that were animalistic. And I thought, I can't see myself in this world. In the way I could in her poems. But I said, it's complex, but it's not a relationship without love. Because we don't know what Silvia would have, what destination she might have come to in evolution and she lived. And so it is a big question mark of whether or not that kind of writing would have been perpetuated. And I tried to allow space within that love that I had and still have for her poems to be open to complexity. But one thing that I think I will always be grateful to her for it was the physical and an almost muscular act of taking up space without apology on the page that she taught me when I was 16 or 17. I didn't have words to articulate then but I knew it and I felt it and I felt at home in it like a don't meet your heroes thing with that because, The Bell Jar is kind of its is her but it's not her. I guess. Again, this what we've been talking about all night about how to reconcile different parts of yourself, within yourself. So within this complicated love for Sylvia this poem emerged. All The Men Who Will Not Save You. The maker of missiles, the eroder of doubts, the quiet and triple hit starter of fires the keeper of small bones and spiny growths him with a nesting doll full of hymens and size. Him with scarred hands cut like satellites, him in the night with your cunt in a crab catcher, the undoer of welts, the unbelted of catechisms, the one with a face full of virtuous children, the geographer who cried shaking out your maps them who do damage and never say sorry, them as who damage you. Sorry and little drips them damages with grasshopper bloods sparkling on the shirt cuffs. In the bright and suspicious sun. I've always known I would devirgin myself best fistful of pens, covers leaking neon, sour like cherries sliced off the vine. A fistful of pens was my first lover. I learned much later in life that a girl cannot deflower and so I plundered the language right out of myself. First, my fist a massive ink and blood and gel and Barbie perfume. First, my nail beds sour and puckered as the mouths of saints. Let no man say he came here first. Listen to him declaim. But no, I was the original breaker of me. I took, I kept, I hoarded

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everything and locked the husbands out first and last of their names and stations. Runners up in the violent arts. When I am born again to this life, you will not know me. When I come startling into the world how precious the cry torn from lips like a hole stop. Miniature guns spilling between gum work, I plan to come back here blazing gelled in the saddle ready to raise it down ready to buck wild and bloody and fight. If you hold me in your arms like a promise, I'll dissolve. If you think you're going to make a bride of me, sweet boy. I'll melt.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 46:51

Thank you. I mean, that's just taking a moment that I think it's it was really Yeah, that's really great. And also, again, I suppose there's that word that went back to swing around from the beginning, which is visceral, there's something uncompromising about how you're presenting this rebirth. That rebirth, I suppose, rebirth, as like a grounding of the self. Sometimes I've read your work as kind of like birthing myself, or how and in what ways do we as especially as queer people have to mother and father and other ourselves? Not as the sense of not in a sense of that would be best, but it's, you have to or you'll die. Yeah, that there's a survival aspect to it. And I wondered whether when there's kind of a very visceral, self birthing, or in pregnant like having sex with yourself. How do you how do you kind of think through that in such a way that you don't end up, kind of traumatizing yourself? Going through that kind of the rebirth? It needs to be traumatic. But do you feel grounded? like how do you ground yourself when you're doing that?

Shivaneer Ramlochan 48:22

So many inappropriate answers. Just filtering them out.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 48:30

You can do an inappropriate answer. There's no

Shivaneer Ramlochan 48:31

I don't know if I can. Okay. I mean I would be arrested. Oh.

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Listen, I feel like one of the best things about doing this work is the community I get to do it in, which is a very sharp departure from who I thought I would write. I thought for years, I wouldn't show this work to anyone. But it was too strange too weird, too queer too freaky, nobody would want it, nobody would want to hold it. But I have come to understand that it is okay to be held in queer community. And as a person who has problems just generally with being held as I think like that traditional first daughter syndrome, you care for others, you are always in the process of taking care of problems whether you've been asked to or not always one with the schedule or the clipboard or the itinerary with the to do list when someone dies. You're the one of the family who holds it together. So I mean, you don't hold yourself together. And you were like this exquisite mess just walking around.

**Tom Lockwood-Moran 49:38
Giving, giving giving but not.**

**Shivane Ramlochan 49:40
Yeah. And in the queer poetry community is where I found unsolicited tenderness. And it was terrifying at first because I don't succumb easily to giving myself that grace, I guess. The hero writers Oh, also writing similar and different things, often coming to the same conclusions that we need each other, that if we are going to be forced underground, forced into caves, not of our own making, we just light that bitch up, like putting fairy lights everywhere and like stripper poles and fairs and decorate the place. Make make the home that you're forced into more hospitable, yes, especially when some of us, not me, but were ejected from their actual homes, you know, so there are homes, in the poems and different kinds of art, where I thought I can reconcile the most monstrous parts of myself with each little monster deserves some kind of love. And I can get to that, because I'm not alone.**

**Tom Lockwood-Moran 50:56
Absolutely, and each monster deserves their lair, as well,**

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where they, where they might kind of come up and get someone else, you know, and drag them down or not. Yeah, but that being dragged down into a cave isn't always a negative, no, you know, and actually coming out into the light can be the most toxic thing, or the most hurtful thing ever, I guess. There's like cave allegories on cave allegories, and again, you can go to like, let's go to philosophy, but let's not, you know, let's just have it be a beautiful monstrous underground lair. Thank you for that. That was really, do you feel? I know you were talking about kind of difficult or complex relationship with Sylvia Plath. Yeah. Did you find in that visceral nature, did you find a sense of peace with that? It felt like you could kind of while you were, there's like a vicious way of having sex with yourself that might also be kind of getting exorcising Sylvia out of you.

Shivane Ramlochan 51:59

I think so. I think Sylvia and I have reached an accord because she's, you know, she was an important ghost to me for a long time. But I think I realized she was no more an important ghost than my ancestors, you know? And there's a poem a new, a newish poem called Cane Field, which kind of tries to exhume some of the ghosts of indenture. And I think a lot about what Sylvia would think of those women. And, you know, yeah, again, if I could speak to ghosts, I'd be like, you can write whatever you want Sylvia, but you have to witness the women and the world.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 52:32

Yes. Yeah. You have to witness and you have to, you know,

Shivane Ramlochan 52:35

Who knows what conclusions she's come to in her afterlife? Maybe she is just fully enlightened floating around.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 52:40

Yeah, she could be here. How did you find that at Plath fest? I suppose because it's such a venerate.

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Shivaneer Ramlochan 52:48

Oh, that's a that's an interesting question.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 52:51

**Which perhaps isn't for public consumption? We'll see.
Maybe ask after, who knows?**

Shivaneer Ramlochan 52:56

I didn't say something similar to what I shared. I really think I was the only voice that I heard, offer something that was not full of adulation. But I was stoned. Yeah.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 53:07

Yeah, that's good. And the thing is, it's okay to have these heroes in whatever way that people want to have. And to criticize them. No one's saying get rid of them. People are saying, let's talk about, let's talk about them for real. There's another slide that I think had you're writing from a Good Brown Girl from Brave New Words. And I just wanted, I guess, that was very much thinking, again, where we've been returning to this evening about kind of the persona and the self and the mining that comes with that. Yeah. You're also writing at the moment, or you're in the finishing stages of a piece of creative nonfiction. So how much do you think with nonfiction, can there be nonfiction that isn't creative? I guess?

Shivaneer Ramlochan 53:54

No, probably not. This book Unkillable is about in the Caribbean woman's disobedience across three generations, my grandmother's one of whom is alive, one of whom is in the spirit world, my mother, and myself. And it's the real contention with nonfiction is your fidelity to the truth. And again, as we've discussed, the truth is a multiple and confounding thing, right? There's what happens above and beneath the dining room table of your life. And what do I owe to people who are still alive? Who will read this work and interact with it and have feelings about it? Can I ever

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truly distill a person and their experiences through my own imperfect lens into something that is honorable and valuable? And I don't know the answers to those questions, but I know I have to try to do it. And I can only do it through this process of research and inquiry and sitting with the women in my family line and going through documents and thinking obsessively about what we owe to others to ourselves and what we owe to the truth that needs to be told.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 55:12

I think within that section of writing and you talk about the kind of like the unfuckable with unfuckwithable? Yes. That's it. unfuckwithable talisman of things. And I think that's something that is powerful, and is something that can really, anybody can kind of bring up through your work regardless, is that you can mine the deepest recesses of yourself and it's okay to be to find that and also be unfuckwithable.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 55:41

Yeah. Because everyone is you all are. Oh, yeah, you are, you are, we all are.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 55:45

You're all unfuckwithable. Interesting. Yeah, maybe that will be a warm up act to lesbian tension.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 55:54

I feel like the workshop that I'm offering tomorrow is very much about that. And it was that workshop kind of began as permissive act to myself just coming up with exercises I could do to get these difficult truths on the page. And then each exercise was a way of saying you can do this and the world will not end. And you can do this and there might be consequences. And some of them might be shitty but you have the work. Yeah. And you're capable of doing this. And here's how you can also take care of yourself, in the aftermath of doing this work. Even if you're the only person you know, who can hold you, you will still be able to hold yourself, and

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you have the right thing. And that has to be worth something.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 56:37

Absolutely. And you'll have your own home, you'll have your own monster lair to go back to. Well, we haven't got any more readings we were going to kind of pass it on. For any question and answers, any comments anyone would like to bring in from what we've been talking about? You feeling good? That was great. I really enjoyed that. Thanks so much. I guess if we were going to continue talking through what Unkillable means for you at the moment. So that's the next text that you've got coming up. That's coming up next year. Yes. And if anyone,

57:14

I saw you speaking at Bocas litfest, the other day with Anthony Joseph. Yep, it was. And you were talking about family and I was interested in what he was saying about how his poetry gave him more. Even though his dad wasn't there, he was kind of the presence was there in the poetry and that was his way of dealing with it. So I was wondering how that has helped you maybe? Or how it is helping you with his current work. In terms of capturing people that could you weren't necessarily present in your life? I mean, you kind of spoken about ancestors and things. Yeah. But just talking about the effects that the writing has, maybe?

Shivane Ramlochan 57:57

Thank you for that question. And thanks for being a Bocas UK, I think went really well. Unlike Anthony, I, my both my parents are extremely present in my life, which is not to say I've always had an easy relationship with either of them. But writing about my immediate family is a different prospect because of the intense immediacy. And also because I know that when this book comes out, they will see things about themselves that we haven't really shared vocally. But we, we know, the feelings exist, particularly my fraught, but deeply loving relationship with my father. And my deeply loving, hardly ever fraught but very intense relationship with my mother, and how I am this

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composite of as their eldest child, their hopes and dreams for me, which must have gone terribly wrong, but then, kind of righted themselves, sort of, I mean, they're very proud of me, but I do sometimes see expressions of horror on their faces. When I read my work, I think, Oh, God, when is this girl going to write a happy poem? And, and I'm very grateful to them for for their support. I couldn't do any of this without it. And it's, it's a very special kind of support because it's unconditional, but doesn't pretend to understand everything. And so, whatever gets into this book into the groundwater of it will be informed by that trust, but I'm trying to figure out a way to, to not be beholden to it, to tell the truth of our family as much as I can, without thinking because I have the support means I need to frame them in a particular way. Maybe this is something that all memoirs go through. I don't know. I don't know, I have my own place so if they don't want to see me for a little while, but I think it will be fine. I think there must be a way to do this with love and integrity. And that's, that's what I'm trying to reconcile. And while I've been here, I've written some of the most difficult stuff for the for the book. And that was intentional to be away from Trinidad for a while to kind of look at it better from a distance. And think, I love this country. And it's also difficulties to be, which is true of the family. I love my family, but sometimes it's difficult and how to just treat it with patience and discipline. And love ultimately that's what I tried to come back to.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:00:50

Yeah, I guess when you're talking about memoir, as well, it's really interesting. That, you know, I was talking about Staceyann Chin and thought about it. Yeah. But of course, yeah, memoir is such a kind of visceral, again. It doesn't show anybody in necessarily the best light. But it also gives a kind of map to survival, which I believe that some of your kind of poetry and writing does anyway, so it'd be really exciting. I think it'd be really healing for a lot of people to see that in a narrative way, I think. Thank you. Yeah. Any other Yeah.

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1:01:32

I wanted to ask a technical bit more technical question if I can. So I noticed that most of your lines, or they struck me as being used use quite a lot of enjambment and that you're, it's rare for your poetic lines to end with a nice clean ending. And not only but more than that, they often end with kind of like quite, you know, almost like functional words, like you know, for and if so, the punch of your, your, your poems often come mid line rather than traditional end of the line. And it's like it happened so often in the poems you're reading, I was wondering, like, what what you feel the poetic line offers you in that way? Like, because it seems like it's quite a conscious choice to avoid certain, you know, sort of like, poetic conventions?

Shivane Ramlochan 1:02:23

There is a definite style of poetry that we studied, I went to a Roman Catholic Convent School in Trinidad got a very prestigious education that was very post colonial. And I love Keats as much as anybody else. I did love him a lot, actually. I mean, yeah, a lot to be fair. But um, I was also, I felt deprived of our own Caribbean canon of poetry as a 17 or 18 year old. And so when I started pursuing in university, the books we were studying, were very Caribbean, the Caribbean and its diaspora. And I just read everything I could voraciously in and outside of that, and because storytelling has always been so oral, in the Caribbean, I also sought out poems that were rarely transcribed into books, like a lot of the early poetics of Linton Kwesi. Johnson, for example, of performers who made their name and their did the hard graft through oral tradition. And the line just became a thing to be respected, but also to be celebrated. And it felt feminist to do that work, it felt you're very right to say it was intentional, was absolutely intentional, it felt that each line needed to be as unpredictable as whether as, as because some of the poems are trying to channel a panic of a loss of breath. And I thought, how could I do that across the lines and sustain that tension that needed to tell a certain kind of truth? And so yeah, I love this question. It's not I don't think anyone's ever asked me before about my lines.

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And they mean a lot to me. I think they've served my work very well. I almost feel guided by them sometimes by the form of the poem assuring me away through to the end or to the next poem. And so it's a real happily codependent relationship we have. Thank you.

1:04:49

Thank you so much for all your readings and answering all these beautiful questions. I'm Gita and a lot of the things that you've shared about being queer brown femme first female child, resonated deeply with me, I'm from Singapore. Or I should say I was born in Singapore. But I do have this lineage and heritage from India, as I think it's most visible in my face. And I was wondering, you know, your experience has traveled so much across the queer brown diaspora. How do you write within and outside of the colonial gaze or the white gaze? Toni Morrison talks about?

Shivaneer Ramlochan 1:05:39

That's a beautiful question. Gita, thank you. I was just in Singapore for the Writers Festival. And it was lovely. And pleasantly hot, like home, and then I came back here. I'm very happy to be here. I just wish I could have brought some of that climate to share with all of you. That's a wonderful question. And I do struggle, I think it's, it would be honest to admit that it's not always easy. Some of these new poems talk about desire for white men, which is a difficult thing to reconcile, to admit, as being true to myself, and how that desire has almost always been like a twin blade of helpless eroticism and intense fear. So there's a symbolic persona of a border patrol agent who occurs in poems who need to reserve those poems perceives a sexual relationship with but that leads to incredible violence. And it feels like my mother would like you all to know, this is not me. And my relationship with any real border patrol agent, she just finds that important to point out. Actually, it's just that you know, maybe for this new book, what I could do is write like a little pamphlet of disclaimers. These things did not happen. How to how to resist the

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seduction of empire as personified, and a white cisgender man who is conventionally attractive? How to be honest and proud about my lineage, while admitting there are things about white tradition that are deeply seductive? I don't ever want to pretend that I have it figured out or that I'm immune to it, or that I don't feel tormented. It's been very hard for me to have any kind of relationship with an Indian man who is not my father or my brothers because of the intense fear that I felt growing up from faceless but all too specific other Indian men. And I'm so glad that my father and my brothers are who they are. Because I can't imagine not loving them. But I, you mentioned Toni, and I think that the root of the answer is in there. So reach for a woman, black woman, woman of color, non binary writers who've done this work for generations reach for Toni, for Octavia, for the poet I, for Dionne Brand and these are my fore mothers, I had a really hard time saying that I ever had a mentor. It was something I really rebelled against. But I do have this really powerful poetic lineage that I write into. And I feel like with these badass women, kind of like, in like a, like, you know, those angels are kind of like at the top of cathedrals and yeah, like, same they're usually all white of course. It's like, picture that yes, like, Toni Morrison and Dionne Brand up there and Audre Lorde telling you it's gonna be okay. We did this. We figured our way through this. And you will, you will, too. Thank you.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:09:13

Yeah, I wondered how I guess, in terms of these relationships, or between kind of academics working in post colonial scholarship, such as me and others that will be in the room, like, how does that dynamic play out for you? Because often, often, it's something that people are maybe afraid to talk about, or, like, I'm so white, what am I doing here? Or that's the way it feels? It's almost like sometimes that colonial gaze is all is also it's in me, or it's in whoever sat here, and how do you navigate that? I guess.

Shivane Ramlochan 1:09:52

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I have increasingly less time for bigots as we were discussing. I've learned the hard way how to absent myself from a space where I don't feel comfortable. And I just suffered through a lot of awkward racialized interactions early on in my writing career, which I wouldn't do now, if I weren't comfortable with you in particular ways, we couldn't have this conversation. And it's about research, I research a lot more than I used to. It's about trusting other people to lead me to safe connections with white scholars.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:10:27

Yeah. I guess again, there's something underground about that. Isn't there I think tends to be something that people don't necessarily always see that there are, there are there are ways in which you can navigate away from someone underneath without them even knowing. And that's important.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 1:10:48

Which is not happening now.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:10:50

No never. Were there any more questions? It's completely up to you. Sure. Yeah. If you're

Shivaneer Ramlochan 1:11:00

New, or old?

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:11:05

Oh, it's that. I suppose you just talked with me? That's, that's quite heavy. You just talked about border patrol. That's not the way to end. Oh, Cane Field, because you talked about Cane Field could be good. Yeah. If that's okay, if you're sure. Thank you.

Shivaneer Ramlochan 1:11:27

Of course, so Cane Field has appeared in Wasafiri, Afterlives of Indenture issue, which was edited by Andil Gosine and Nalini Mohabir. And it's, this is a poem I was talking about

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when I said, I'd present this to Sylvia Plath and say, this is my ancestry. These are the women you can't ignore. And so you'll hear some names of Indian women who, and these names have fallen out of conventional fashion, they're thought of as old fashioned and not very attractive anymore, but to me, they are beautiful. And they hold generations of history and endurance and joy and power. And Cane Field is a real reckoning with my beloved dead. And I only really started to read it. This tour, actually. And I what I hope is that in sharing my relationship with the ghosts of indenture that you all feel well accompanied by your own beloved dead, and that no matter where they are, they're well fed and watered. Cane Field. The girl that rises from the cane field will have blood on her thighs don't run from her ghost. Stop. Stand there. In the toll sugar. Let her taste your sweat. Let her lick the litany of your children's names from your diamond cut barrel. Her name is Kalalty fit bony knees like sharp moth wings drowned in the village well, her first year on this island, heavy, pregnant and 13. Her name is Indrawati. Heavy voice of hot ghee honey in each bajan. Hair scraped back from her forehead with the flats of her hand anointed and coconut oil. Holy manderwoman of ragged nails who died of field work, housework bad work, collapsed, facedown in the Kiva at 30. Her name to a secret Her name is her father, picking up a cutlass and telling her to run. Her name is the bareness of her feet on the rain drunk brown earth a splattering of terrors slicking from the pitch pine floorboards to the unpaved yard, and her name is on the pulse of the dholak. Her name is what she hears from the puja down the dirt road while fleeing from that killing. And though she has been dead before the end of indenture if you find yourself in the cane fields past midnight, she may give you her name, her secret name. She may tell you how she was killed. She may show you the site where she was held down. And it is your job not to look away. And it is your job to listen.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:15:31

I did that thing. We said this at the beginning, you know,

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what it's my weird shaped head. That was really, that was really amazing. I think right at the end there. I've always felt that. That kind of almost repetition it wants to do in my head constantly. If it's your job, to listen, it's your job to watch. I think that's something that's really important to take away from what we've been thinking about all together. Tonight. And thank you for that. Thank you. Any more there any more questions?

Philippa Douglas 1:16:04

We have time for one more question.

1:16:06

Oh, great. Thank you. Hi, thank you so much for your talk today. I just wanted to ask you to kind of end on a good note. What are you hopeful for in terms of your work? And in terms of the world? Wow.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:16:23

That's a nice way to end.

Shivane Ramlochan 1:16:25

Amazing. Yeah, I am. You know, in 2018, when they repeal the sodomy laws in Trinidad, like I said, I couldn't imagine that would have happened. And it kind of opened up the space of hope in me for what else could be made possible in my islands. There's a way in which Caribbean people have felt, they've always needed to emigrate to survive, especially if they're queer, like, you live elsewhere to breathe more freely in your own skin. And while I would never reputed any Caribbean person for whom that was true, I really hope that we can begin to live more freely in our own islands on our own land. So I mean, if and if, you know, in 2018, I couldn't believe those laws be repealed, why could I not stop believing that gay marriage could be made possible in Trinidad, or that, even before that protection in the workplace, for people of LGBTQ plus ideation, or that trans rights would be would begin to be taken seriously across the Caribbean archipelago? I want, I

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really want the Caribbean and its diaspora to start feeling like a riotously joyful place for people to be and to exist, and to come back home to if they want to, and to write all the books and make all the plays and do all of the legalized sex work, which is also not legal, in the Caribbean, at home. Home can be anywhere. I mean, home could be here, home is like psycho geographical as much as anything else. But I think if there are people suffering across the world, because they don't feel that they can come home, I want more of us to be able to come home. And I think, I think in a way that's maybe true for what I want for my writing as well. There are ways I speak here, or in the US, I wouldn't speak about my own writing in Trinidad. And I'd like to be freer, and more unapologetic, and more unfuckwithable. About that. I hope I will be I'm going to try to be.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:18:39

You will be Yeah, I think that's I think that's really that's a really beautiful way to end and thank you for that. And thank you for everyone's questions. Also, thank you to Nottingham Contemporary for having us. Thank you Shivane. Just that was amazing. Thank you.

Philippa Douglas 1:18:50

Sorry, I would just like to say a big thank you to Shivane for the beautiful readings and everything you've shared with us this evening, as well as Tom for creating such an interesting and engaging discussion around Shivane's work.

Tom Lockwood-Moran 1:19:01

Thank you very much. Thank you so much, everyone.