

## **Writers who have inspired me**

Nick Makoha

Asking a writer what writers inspire you is like asking a DJ who your favourite rapper is. It is an ever-evolving situation. I don't just like rappers, I like hip hop. Hip hop is not just a genre, it is a lifestyle. You could also say this about language in relation to the poet. We all enter into language at birth ignorant of its magnitude, power and value. Through it an understanding of the world is formed; the words mother, father, family, time and music are just some of the concepts forged through language.

What connects you to me at this present time is language. Your eyes are decoding these symbols on a page. The symbols allow my thoughts from the past to connect with your mind in the present moment. This is because language is able to hold thought, move us through time, communicate emotion, but most important of all, language is able to hold all these together as story. So, the writers that inspire me are those that expand my understanding of the world and deepen my relationship to it through story.

As a young poet I often would confuse moments of excitement or enlightenment with the idea of inspiration. I would naively wait for this motivational state. Without it, I thought, I could not bring ideas into fruition. However, now I am aware that inspiration is a process. A process by its

very nature happens over a period of time. So, let me share with you two artists from different genres who have inspired me over time to be in service to my art of poetry.

The first unusual suspect is Spalding Gray. If you had asked me who he was when I first started writing, I would have responded *I have no clue*. He wrote the fantastic monologue *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987). In this one-person show he shares his experiences of filming a small role in the award-winning film *The Killing Fields* (1984) that looks at the year of 1973 when the Cambodian national army waged war against the Khmer Rouge, a result of the Vietnam War spilling over Cambodia's borders.

I must have been eight or nine years old when I saw *Swimming to Cambodia* on BBC2, and I think it was way past my bedtime. Spalding Gray performed the monologue for two hours; BBC2 presented it over two nights. The only props he used in the show were a desk, a notepad and a chair. I watched both hours without blinking (or at least it felt like it). I just stood in front of the TV, and without any pyrotechnics he brought a world outside my knowledge into clear and present focus.

As much as I love language on the page, I also love its sound and the impulses that trigger us to use language. As part of my praxis I want to know how all the elements of sound, vision and text work, as a unit and as parts of the whole. As a child watching Spalding Gray, I did not have the language to articulate why I liked it. I think it was the way that the politics of another world entered into his casual conversation. In my neighbourhood in Peckham there was an independent bookstore on the high street where my mother would buy books about Uganda and its politics. Uganda never

entered into daily common conversation in London. The only other way international politics entered into my world was when my mum would watch the Nine (and later Ten) O’Clock News at night.

Having politics enter into my life through art was new. Looking at Spalding Gray in *Swimming to Cambodia* allowed me to unhinge the prejudices that I had acquired since moving to London. It is easy to become very eurocentric and lose sensitivity for the world beyond that. The show made me question – who am I and where am I from? In an effort to fit in, regrettably, my Ugandan-ness had taken a back seat. I have come to notice that the Western gaze is dominant in many parts of the world. Because of its invasive nature it often deletes or dilutes stories that do not run parallel to its interpretive agenda.

There is a lot to learn from what Spalding Gray did in that theatre show. I wanted to know if I could transfer the learning into my own genre of poetry. How could I reveal the politics of elsewhere through story? A master, who I think achieves this, is Derek Walcott, particularly in his last poetry collection, *White Egrets* (2010). In 54 poems he flies, as the title poem suggests, like a bird from his native St Lucia out across the world to New York, to Western Europe, and then returns home. The poet is close to death and is eager to leave no stone unturned in this collection. In his quest for one more day’s flight he writes elegies to Caribbean writers John Hearne and Aimé Césaire. He also talks about the legacy of the British empire on his island of St Lucia. He looks at the themes of reconciliation, regret and memory. In fact, the title poem, ‘White Egrets’ is a meditation on memory and the passing of time.

These two works, *White Egrets* and *Swimming to Cambodia*, made me wonder what the forces were that formed my native country, Uganda. They are pivotal works I used to help write my collection, *Kingdom of Gravity* (Peepal Tree, 2017). Both Walcott and Gray moved me to consider the importance of place as well as my own importance. I came to Britain as a refugee when I was four years old to escape the Idi Aami regime. I realise that I am often interested in works that question and interrogate notions of belonging. Walcott in his poem 'Pastoral' interrogates America, juxtaposing its natural beauty against a colonising process that uses religion as mechanism to absolve the guilt of 'a debt still owing' inherent in the formation of the white American nation. Don't take my word for it. Listen to Walcott:

The country has caught fire from the single spark  
of a prophesying preacher, its embers glowing,  
its clouds are smoke in the onrushing dark

[...]

while a white country spire insists on heaven.

### **Nick Makoha**

Nick Makoha is the founder of The Obsidian Foundation. In 2017, Nick's debut collection, *Kingdom of Gravity*, was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection and was one of the *Guardian's* best books of the year. Nick is a Cave Canem Graduate Fellow and an alumnus of Spread the Word's 'Complete Works' programme. He won the 2015 Brunel

International African Poetry Prize and the 2016 Toi Derricotte & Cornelius Eady Prize for his pamphlet *Resurrection Man*. His poems have appeared in the *Cambridge Review*, the *New York Times*, *Poetry Review*, *Rialto*, *Poetry London*, *TriQuarterly Review*, *Boston Review*, *Callaloo* and *Wasafiri*. He is a Trustee for the Arvon Foundation and the Ministry of Stories, and a member of the Malika's Poetry Kitchen collective. [nickmakoha.com](http://nickmakoha.com)

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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