

## Interview with Kayo Chingonyi, Poet and Creative Facilitator

Lioba Schreyer

I first contacted Kayo Chingonyi, because I was interested in his work as a poet. While planning the workshop “Voices from the Margins,” I was looking for a writer to perform as a part of the cultural event when I stumbled across his poem “Legerdemain” (*Campaign in Poetry*, The Emma Press, 2015). But I soon learnt that Chingonyi is more than a poet.

In his 2011 profile for *Poetry International Web*, Alan Ward calls Chingonyi a “creative facilitator”.<sup>1</sup> A title well earned, as a look into his biography and my conversation with him reveal. Born in Zambia in 1987, Kayo Chingonyi moved to the UK in 1993. In addition to writing and performing poetry, he raps and teaches creative writing workshops at universities, schools and youth centres. He has collaborated with the dancer Sean Graham, and with the composer Fred Thomas, and curated events for the Institute of Contemporary Arts as well as London’s Africa Centre, to mention but a few of his projects. The London-based poet holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Sheffield and an MA in Creative Writing from Royal Holloway, University of London.<sup>2</sup>

Kayo Chingonyi has completed residencies with Kingston University, Cove Park and others. He won the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize in 2012 and was shortlisted for the Brunel University African Poetry Prize in 2013. His first pamphlet, *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012) is subject of this interview. Following Kayo’s suggestion, we discussed the elegies “Kenta”, “Alternate Take” and “A Proud Blemish”. He has published a second pamphlet, *The Colour of James Brown’s Scream* (Akashic, 2016), and his first full-length collection, *Kumukanda* (Chatto & Windus, 2017).

Kayo Chingonyi attended the workshop “Voices from the Margins,” held at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, 23 and 24 September 2016, where this interview was conducted. The interview was edited and expanded in consultation with Kayo Chingonyi between January and March 2017.

**Lioba Schreyer:** Our project is called “Voice from the Margins.” Where do you fit in there?

**Kayo Chingonyi:** I think because I came to the English language as an outsider and I still exist within that space, there is a sense in which my voice could be seen as marginal, outside of the norm, somehow. And so, I feel the need, in the writing that I do, to affirm my sense of belonging to the centre rather than the margins, because English is a language I have lived with for a long time. It is the language I think in. I can express myself well in English. So, the notion of voices from the margins makes me think about how canons are made, and also what we think of as the ‘unmediated, general, objective’ voice.

I am also interested in trying to rupture our notion of the unmediated voice. A title like “Voices from the Margins” is immediately provocative to me, and interesting. And since it is a workshop, it is also an opportunity to interrogate the title. It felt like something I would be interested in.

**LS:** I asked the previous question at the reading last night, when we first met. Now that you have participated in the workshop, did your view on the title change?

<sup>1</sup> Alan Ward, ‘Kayo Chingonyi,’ *Poetry International Web*, 15 May 2011, 09 January 2018  
<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/19398/Kayo-Chingonyi>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Bio,’ *Kayo Chingonyi*, 2015, 09 January 2018 <https://kayochingonyi.com/bio/>.

**KC:** I have recently read a book of essays called *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla. He collected a body of essays by different writers who identify as immigrants to the UK. It expanded my notion of what being marginalised is, because my notion of that comes from being black within the context of Britishness, but also African within the context of blackness. A lot of the kind of contemporary iconography of blackness is African American and not African per se. And even 'African' you could rupture into smaller subdivisions.

Thinking about the margins is to think about subjectivity, the very specific things which cannot be generalised. And those are maybe the important things to maintain in writing, because they are the things we quite often keep to ourselves; the things that we do not think are worthy of literature. So, yes, in the project of destabilising what the centre is, we need to include those voices that are deemed marginal. So, it was nice to participate and to think about the Zimbabwean poetry scene and to think about Pacific and Samoan and Hawai'ian poetics in the context of those discussions. It broadened my thinking.

**LS:** One of the topics that was prominent was the difference between oral and written literature. You present your work as both, written texts as well as live performances and recordings. The genre, of course, lends itself to both. Does this double-presentation influence your writing process?

**KC:** To my best understanding, poetry, in the written tradition, is always engaged with the oral tradition in literature. As a poet, you are interested in the meaning of a word, but also its sound and the meanings that are enacted by that sound; you are interested in pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic meanings, and the feeling that a sound can embody and enact in a listener.

To me, poetry is an opportunity to fix that gulf, that notion of there being a split between the oral and the written traditions in my own understanding, and to bring those two sides of literary practice together. I am always interested in giving performances, but also in consolidating that in print.

But I am not interested in a final version of a text being the authoritative text. I am interested in the little changes and shifts that can happen through performing a particular piece of work a number of times over a number of years; a word might change or shift or a reference might become outdated and need to be changed or other shifts might happen based on how the work is performed. Being somebody who performs and publishes is something that is nourishing to my writing.

It has always been at the heart of what I think of as poetry writing, as opposed to writing short stories or writing novels. Authors read extracts from works of fiction, but it is not quite the same culture of orality, because you can take a single poem, memorise it and you have some ownership over it for the rest of your life, whereas it is much more difficult to memorise an entire work of fiction, though you can try, I suppose.

**LS:** At last night's reading, you mentioned the double-spheres of poetry as a public and a private genre. I am asking this, because I think that is what makes poetry so compelling. You mentioned racism to be a topic that you focussed on for a while; then you neglected it but returned to it later. And while it is possible to inform yourself about racism in other ways, reading essays and watching the news, poetry adds a private sphere to the issue.

Now, I assume that the private sphere I find as a reader possibly comes from private experiences of the poet. How do you negotiate the spheres in your writing? Is this something you

consider? Do you just write straight from the heart, or does the fact that you will publish it and, in a sense, expose yourself influence your writing process?

**KC:** I would challenge this idea of “from the heart” in relation to the work that I publish, because the process of writing takes me away from the original impulse which made me write one word or a phrase that I then followed into the process of writing that poem. So, early on I am not necessarily sure where a poem is going to go and so I cannot really think of it as an expression from the heart as such, but I am trying to follow a bodily connection as well as a cerebral connection in the writing. What is personal in my work is that attempt to be present, as present as I can be, as somebody who is by nature quite reserved in other spheres of life.

I do not really have to negotiate the public and private in my writing in the sense of feeling that I cannot publish a certain thing because it is too personal, because I do not really write in that style very often. But even when I write something that has happened in my life, I am always engaged in some process of transformation, so that it is not just what happened, but it is maybe involved in some musical or rhythmical process, which then takes it out of the experience alone into something else.

I am interested in the genres of memoir and biography, those truth-telling mediums, whereby it is not necessarily about a musical connection, it is more about how the story moves somebody. Is this story authentic? How does this story make me feel? While I am also interested in a feeling when I write a poem, what is equally important are the words, specifically their shape; how they make me feel, and how they make others feel through publication and performance.

**LS:** Can you tell us more about your prose?

**KC:** I write prose criticism. I have been writing essays lately in which I have been trying to marry a literary critical voice with a more personal voice which navigates some of the experiences I’ve been through. That is something I am increasingly interested in and it is an area of literary criticism that is very compelling to me in terms of my reading. I do love to read straight criticism and theory. But at the same time, I am also interested in those presentations of particular subjectivities which you can find in a book of personal essays. So, while I am interested in prose, it is not really prose fiction too often. It is not that I am not interested, but it takes me such a long time to get into a story that it’s more of a long-term endeavour; whereas poems, they take a long time as well, but I can be working on a number of them at the same time.

**LS:** How did you start writing in the first place?

**KC:** I cannot really remember a time when I was not writing, but I began as a voracious reader. At primary school, I would borrow books from the school library, five or six at a time, take them home, read all of them, bring them back, read some more. I always had books with me. And I was an only child, so it was really just books that occupied my time up until I started to buy music and albums. For a long time, it was all about books and TV. And to me, TV has always been a literary form in some way. I have always been interested in the writing of it, as well as its value as entertainment. I have always been conscious that somebody wrote this; I even used to want to be a cartoonist. And so I have always been interested in authorship.

**LS:** Sounds like you just really grew into it. Why did you not end up being a cartoonist? Or is that still something that you might work on?

**KC:** It is something that I would love to do, but I am really interested in following what comes naturally to me. Writing and using language has always been something that I found easy. Not that it did not take work, but there was a fluency which I did not have with drawing. Drawing is different in that some people have that fluency, but most people must work at it a lot and go into the detail a lot. And when I go into the detail when I am drawing, I find it really frustrating. Whereas when I go into detail and have to work hard when I am writing, it never feels difficult, even though it might be taxing.

**LS:** I would like to talk about a few of your poems from *Some Bright Elegance*. Let us begin with “Kenta”.

**KC:** A few years ago, I studied with a poet and lecturer called Anthony Joseph, who is also a musician, and he is really interested in surrealism and he showed us a poem called “Free Union” by André Breton, in which the poet makes a number of associative descriptions of his wife. And he challenged us to make a similar imagistic portrait of somebody and I decided to make a portrait of my little brother, who I do not really remember. He was born when I was two years old and he only lived a few months. There are a few pictures that we have and that is it. This was a feeling of loss while not being able to name specifically that loss, because I do not remember a person as such; I remember a set of things that I have been told and I remember maybe a set of disconnected fragments, so this way of working was very conducive to writing about Kenta, because it is fragmentary by nature.

I also became interested in poems which are not paraphrasable but exist as affective statements. Some forms of writing are easily critiqued in that you can say plenty about them, you can close read them easily and get to the bottom of the poem. I wanted to make poems that did not necessarily have a bottom that you can get to. And this is an example of that.

**LS:** What is also interesting is that “Kenta” is printed in a landscape-format and line endings looks less conscious, apart from the anaphora. You use backslashes as well. Can you tell me something about that? Why did you decide to write it in this format?

**KC:** At that point, I was interested in prose poems. And I think the conventional line in mainstream British poetry, like the pentameter, has become over-used. So, I was just trying to see what else I could do.

**LS:** Let’s move on to “Alternate Take”. What can you tell us about this poem?

**KC:** The notion of an alternate take is just a borrowing from the musical recording whereby jazz musicians would make different versions. I am just thinking about how you can narrate a particular event in your life in lots of different ways.

**LS:** In both poems, you use the word *mwaice wandi*. What does it mean?

**KC:** It is a way of referring to your younger sibling. “Kenta” is dedicated to my brother; “Alternate Take” is addressed to him but dedicated to my father and the last elegy, “A Proud Blemish,” is for my mother.

**LS:** Can you tell us more about the writing of “Alternate Take”? There seems to be a temporal distance between the subject, the father’s passing, and the speaker, as if it is a recollection later in the life of the speaker. What prompted you to write the elegies at the time?

**KC:** The distance comes from being unable to write the poem any sooner through reasons of failed technique and also the fact that such a poem inhabits one of the most painful moments of my life. That was a poem I began in my late teens and finished just before *Some Bright Elegance* came out. There is a sense in which such a poem can't be satisfactorily completed because it is trying to do what some elegies do and stop time in a particular moment so that those lost can be remembered. Nick Mount has an excellent lecture on the work of Sylvia Plath which is available online. In that lecture he talks about how the lyric poem is an attempt to stop time.

**LS:** Would you like to talk about the one for your mother, "A Proud Blemish"?

**KC:** I moved to the UK when I was six. I had been living with my dad in Zambia and my mum was studying in the UK. I was six when my dad passed, and so I came to live with her. And then my mum passed when I was thirteen. This is a poem exploring that year in my life: When I was thirteen years old, in the year 2000; the music I was listening to, the milieu that I was in. It is a lament of the way that we are as children; that we do not appreciate what our parents have sacrificed for us. I think that is one of the key issues of childhood. There is a carefree aspect to it. Or there can be, anyway. These are all things I came to appreciate later, and the poem is really written out of that appreciation.

**LS:** Thank you for sharing this. You mention your mother tongue in "A Proud Blemish." Which language is that? And what is your relationship to it?

**KC:** Bemba is the language I spoke first though I would be considered Luvale in Zambia because of my name and my father's heritage. I do not speak either language though I can sometimes follow simple exchanges in Bemba. Part of the problem is that I have now become so fluent in English I hate giving up that fluency when speaking a language, I don't know as well. I have resolved to try, however.

**LS:** Last night, one of the questions from the audience was: 'Where is home?'

**KC:** I am always inclined to answer the same question differently when it is put to me in a different context. I have been thinking about the spaces where I can feel at home and those spaces have to include some relationship to music. I feel at home in places where music is at the centre of life, whether that be places with a strong culture of clubbing and night life or just places where social dance and song is a part of the culture.

I'd like to spend some time in Latin America. I have only been to Mexico, but it is a place that I felt, not necessarily that I belonged, but that my presence there was not cause for suspicion as such. It was cause for interest and led to me having conversations with people, whereas some of the places that I have been, there is an inherent suspicion, especially in the United States. I just went to the States for the first time recently for an extended period of time and the level of suspicion in certain places just felt odd to me.

I feel at home in places that have some relationship to orality and music, and also in places where my presence might be interesting to somebody or where that might lead to a conversation.

**LS:** Did that come as surprise to you, the suspicion you faced when you went to the US?

**KC:** In the States there is that sense of separation which I had not quite experienced in that way. There is just the sense that they do not want people to visit; they want to make it as hard as possible. And those people who do visit, they do not look upon them in a friendly light. They work out whether that person is a threat first and then they decide whether they want to be

friendly or not. Whereas in some places that I have been to there was friendliness immediately. And even if there is suspicion there, that is done in a way that is quite different.

**LS:** Where in the US were you?

**KC:** I went to LA and I went to New York. I felt this more in NYC than I did in LA. In LA I felt at home. But, NYC was very strange to me.

**LS:** That surprises me, because NYC, I would say, is so multicultural.

**KC:** It is, but I guess because of its bigness it has lots of pockets of communities which do not necessarily mix. Even though there might be certain mixtures, there are still prominent, big communities which never mix at all, which was strange to me.

**LS:** Is that different in London, where you live?

**KC:** I think so, because I live in a part of London which has a large Hasidic-Jewish population and there is a Muslim population next to that and then several different religious denominations from Christianity but also just people from all around the world. And it is a very middle class area. At the same time, there isn't quite the same sense of suspicion.

For example, I can wander into a neighbourhood which is mostly Hasidic-Jewish and my presence there might be a little bit weird in so far as there aren't so many people who aren't from that community. But at the same time there is just an acceptance that being in London encompasses mixing with lots of different people and going to shops that sell all manner of different types of food and so forth. Whereas, when I was in NYC, there was a feeling of separation, a strong feeling of separation, particularly in Brooklyn where I was staying.

**LS:** I'd also like to talk about your forthcoming collection of poetry, *Kumukanda*. You mentioned working with your editor in that context yesterday, and I would like to talk about this cooperation and the editorial process. How does preparing this collection differ from your previous experience, when, for example, feedback would come from a live audience in a less refined way?

**KC:** I have never really gotten feedback from a live audience in a pointed, meaningful way. It is nice that people seem to appreciate the work when I give readings, but that does not compare to the critical feedback given in an editorial process or workshop. To improve my poems, I usually meet with friends, share work and talk about it that way.

My second pamphlet, *The Colour of James Brown's Scream*, had a quite stringent and thorough editorial process whereby there was editorial commentary. The first pamphlet, *Some Bright Elegance*, did not have that. The poems had already gone through certain editorial processes, because I had undertaken a Master's degree in creative writing, which involved a creative writing workshop. Additionally, I was part of another workshop group.

The criticism I receive from readings is just my assumption of what the audience is feeling in a moment. Or if I read something and it doesn't come across, that is a clear way of understanding that I might need to change something. Or if someone comes up to me afterwards and asks me a question about a particular thing, then I might need to clarify. Those are the kinds of critique that I get from the live setting.

But I have not had an editorial experience quite like the one for *Kumukanda*, because for this one there is a dedicated editor and it is a much more refined process in that respect.

**LS:** Are you enjoying it?

**KC:** Yes, so far, it has been good. I think this is a publisher who understands what I am trying to do, so that is helpful. You need an editor who is on your side, ultimately, but also challenges you about particular things, whereas sometimes editors can be not on your side at all, so it feels antagonistic.

**LS:** You are involved in so many other projects. Before coming to Essen, you went to Vienna for The British Council's *Shakespeare Walking Cities*; what other projects are you currently involved in?

**KC:** I have been working with Stirling University for a little while on a project that arose out of the *Out of Bounds* anthology, which came out with Bloodaxe Books in 2012. The anthology is a collection of black, Asian, and minority ethnic poets writing from different spaces in the UK, and affirming their belonging to those places through their writing or through the fact that they set their poems in those places. It is a project in which we host events in different cities in the UK which explore this theme of place and poetry, belonging, language and any related ideas. So, I have been working on that and will continue to do so until November 2016.

I have been doing some writing for classical music as well. My words have been set to music by a composer named Fred Thomas. That has been exciting. Additionally, I am engaged in an ongoing collaboration with a dancer called Sean Graham and I am hoping that we are going to collaborate again on a more long-form work which brings together our disciplines.

**LS:** How does that work, the work with a dancer?

**KC:** Sean is a writer as well, so we begin by, if not necessarily close-reading the work, then by discussing it in a lot of depth for several hours. And then we go into the dance studio and Sean improvises a little or he tries out some pre-defined choreography or we just talk through some things. And so far, the process has always involved myself and Sean as performers, so it is a little bit more hybrid than if Sean were dancing and I were reading and that was it. We are trying to work in that mode as much as we can.

**LS:** Can you elaborate on your collaboration with the composer as well?

**KC:** I don't read music so working with a classical composer mostly involved trying to find a common language. I tried in the writing to think more about the sounds of the words I was using than I ordinarily do. Fred then took his cue from the writing I had done and came up with some compositions. The words and music both responded to a Leoš Janáček string quartet which in turn was a response to Leo Tolstoy's novella, *The Kreutzer Sonata*. The process made me want to work again with a composer.

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