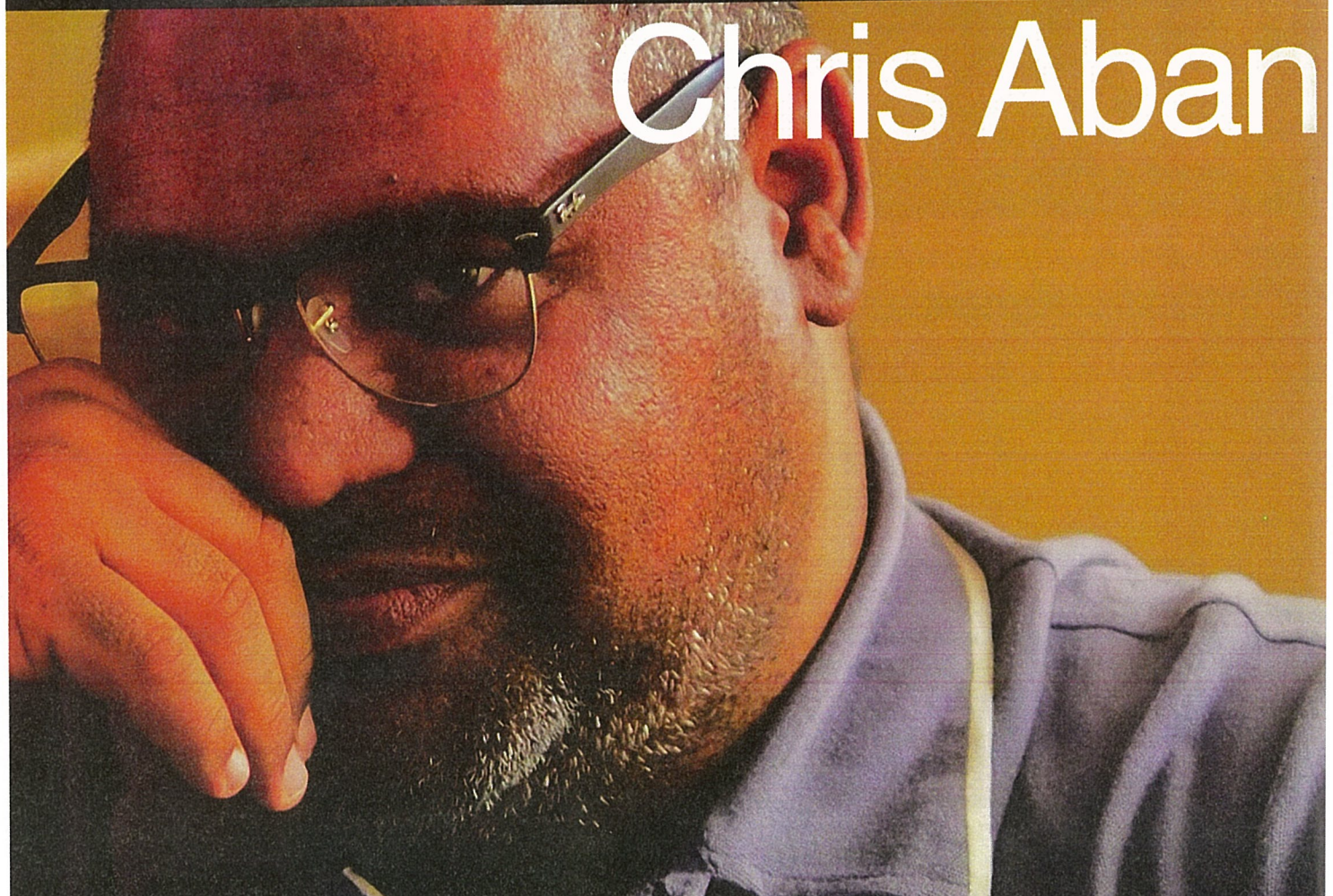


Kwame Dawes &



Chris Aban

A CONVERSATION ABOUT MENTORSHIP

by Heather Sappenfield

"I think the central question for me is a question of becoming: How do we become who we become, and what is the process of becoming?"

—Chris Abani, *World Literature Today*, April 2018

Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani are men with histories of emigration and endurance layered in the accents and cadences of their speech. Abani's words arrive in a British lilt. He is the son of an Oxford-educated Nigerian father and an English mother and activist who would bring him, then seven, along as translator on her excursions to teach the Billings ovulation method of birth control to rural Igbo women. Abani's family fled Nigeria during the Biafran-Nigerian war, spending a year in refugee camps before reaching London, but they later returned. He grew to be a prodigy, reading James Baldwin's *Another Country* at the age of ten and releasing his first novel at sixteen. The Nigerian government deemed the book a blueprint for a coup attempt that occurred not long afterward and imprisoned him. He would write of this ordeal in his first searing poetry collection. Abani moved to London. There, he earned an MA from Birkbeck College. He came to America in 2001 and earned a PhD from the University of Southern California. He is now Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University.

Dawes's accent is distinctly Jamaican with a British twist. He lived his early years in Ghana, land of his mother. When he was eight, his Oxford-educated Jamaican father brought his family, first to England for two years, and then to his island home. It was 1971, and as a ten-year-old boy in a country, new to him, in the Caribbean, when Dawes felt acutely his African-ness. He found acceptance and solace in the rising reggae movement, which valued and yearned to hear of his Ghanaian heritage. Reggae's distinctive rhythms and spirituality twined with those of Ghana, and inspired Dawes to become a musician. This blended history influences his writing today. He earned his PhD at the University of New Brunswick, and, in 2011, became the Louis Frye Scudder Professor of Liberal Arts at the University of South Carolina. He is currently a Chancellor's Professor of English at the University of Nebraska and the Glenna Luschei Editor of *Prairie Schooner*.

The scope of these men's writing is equally varied and remarkable. Both have publications in multiple genres that have garnered prestigious awards, enough to fill this page, the next, and more. Dawes is so prolific, in fact, that he's been called "the busiest man in literature." In January 2018, he was named a Chancellor of the American Academy of Poets. Abani's TED talks on humanitarianism rank among the most viewed. And then there's what they're doing in the realm of African literature. Their African Poetry Book Series, which discovers and nurtures African poets, is in its fifth year and thriving.

Heather Sappenfield: Chris, in a September 2010 Lannan Foundation interview, you said to Kwame, "I am living proof of the work you did in London." Can you speak to this?

Chris Abani: A difficulty for a lot of people, particularly for Americans it seems, is an anxiety with acknowledging lineage. Acknowledging how you've been helped. As though that reduces who you are and what you've done. I don't think that exists a lot in the African context. It's actually assumed that

What we are trying to do is be there with them as they grow and develop. Why? We've experienced both the sensation of not having anybody there with us and having somebody there with us, and we prefer having somebody with us.

everything is an apprenticeship. Even how you learn to cook in your house is an apprenticeship. It's not strictly mentorship in the sense of *I am in charge of you, and you are less*. It's *I have this experience, and if you let yourself be still for a minute, I can show you. But I'm not going to show you how to be me. I'm going to show you how to get to be who you really want to be*. There's an acknowledgment that you are already carrying a wealth of knowledge, you just don't have the experience to get out of your own way to allow the wealth to come.

To segue back to your question: I had published my first novel (back in Nigeria) at sixteen. It was successful and it still stands today. In coming to London, I was involved in agitprop theater, but I wanted to get back to this type of writing. I found myself thrust into a system that was not favorable to people of color. Particularly black people. Imagine a whole literature establishment that didn't care for the wealth of what was there. Only for what could be exploited. And it wanted writers to arrive fixed and finished. Whereas writers who were within the mainstream got mentorship all the time—at multiple levels—that was never fully acknowledged. There was a whole group of us—a big African arts movement was emerging—so the publishing industry wanted to exploit this, but there was no mentorship.

Sappenfield: And this time frame was?

Abani: 1993–94. A brilliant writer, Bernadine Evaristo, (who was then running an organization called Spread the Word) came into contact with Kwame. She proposed to him a series of workshops. Together they dubbed it the Afro Style

School of Poetry. She found funding from the Arts Council, and Kwame would fly over from South Carolina to hold these workshops.

The difference came down to the *kind* of mentorship. No one talked down to you. No one assumed that you were incapable of things. He talked to us as though we were equal, so it inadvertently pulled us up to that level of discourse. The anxieties people usually got about whether they were good enough were no longer the issue. Instead, the issue was that Kwame said *Here's a set of things you should be able to do, and I think you can do it, and I'm going to talk to you as though you can do it. Your part is to do the work involved*. This led to our group of young, black poets having, for the first time, an *aesthetic* conversation, not a political conversation.

It was no longer about what the system was doing to us or not doing to us. It was about finding your own aesthetic. What were the elements of it? Simple questions that no one ever considers. I don't think there are a lot of established poets in the US who are able to answer the question Kwame asked us on the second day: "What is the average syllabic count of a line of your poetry?" The idea behind it being *This is how well you need to know yourself*. What this did was jump the conversation and people started to flourish. No matter the attrition rate, there was a core group of eight to ten people who would always be there.

Most of those people have gone on to do great things. Bernadine Evaristo, who I mentioned before, is a professor at Brunel University, runs the Brunel Prize for African Poetry, and is one of the most influential persons of color in

all of the UK arts scene. There's Roger Robinson, the British-Trinidadian poet, Malika Booker, Patience Agbabi, Karen McCarthy, to name a few from that first season. These workshops ran for a number of years, and everyone involved ended up suddenly jumping their work into fantastic places, leading to a whole generation of people who exist, not only as writers, but with bodies of work. Who have gone on to teach and become mentors.

What happened in these workshops, and I'd say it's not an uncommon thing in Jamaica and Ghana, certainly West Africa as a whole, is the writing is workshopped, yes, but the *writer* is really the thing workshopped. And there's a way that, as a person, your worldview starts to get challenged. If you don't run away from that, it expands.

Essentially, I'd come into the workshop as a novelist, but there I was writing poetry. Kwame didn't say *You won't be a good poet because you've written novels*. What he said was, "Actually, Chris, what you don't realize is that you're a

poet who writes in other forms." That was a profound turn-around for me, and you can see how my work has progressed, even linguistically, from book to book, because it's evolved to a poet's sensibility playing with these other forms. Kwame also has books in multiple forms. His whole idea, because he's an academic, was you can't be a good writer if you don't have a training in literature itself.

This Afro Style School was actually the bedrock of what would later become the African Poetry Book Fund. Some of us on the editorial board come from those workshops. That's what I mean when I say I am a product of that, not only as a writer, but as a teacher and thinker, but also in terms of being able to mentor other people and have friendships with them, if they are capable. Because it's always about the other person's anxiety. About never crossing the line.

There's a respect too. Kwame would never say anything if I didn't acknowledge him. But how can I say anything

in front of a room without also saying how much of it has to do with that gentleman (Dawes) who's standing at the back. I don't think it lessens me; I think it expands my ability as an artist. I *can't* do it alone. Everything I do is a product of other people.

Sappenfield: Kwame, when you ran the workshops, and you treated those students as equals, were you aware of the power of that gesture?

Dawes: A typical conversation I'll have is this: Someone will come to me and say *I want you to mentor me*, and I will say *I don't know what that means. I don't understand that question*. Why don't I understand that question? I understand you coming to say you want me to help you do this. I will support you in doing this. But I think of mentoring as a description of something that has happened, rather than a description of something that is to come.

We've institutionalized mentoring for all kinds of good reasons. In Jamaica for instance, in the long-standing record

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studios, as I have come to understand it, there's a ritual of the movement of somebody getting off the street, going into the gate of the studio, going through the gate and sitting in the courtyard, going into the front room of the studio, going into the outer room where they are waiting to enter the actual studio itself. And finally, then, going into the studio to record. Every single one of those stages lasts for a period, and you're taught, you're told, *It begins with outside the gate*. You are the one that has to go buy the patties. You are the one that has to go buy the beer and bring it. That is your role. You may have songs to sing, but before you do any of that, you have to be the one who goes around and does the other. So when you finally go in, your training has happened all the way through. Nobody says *I was mentored*. What they say is *I'm a prento*. What they mean is *I'm an apprentice. I recognize the veteran-ship*. I use that example because, frankly, it's the organic nature of things. When I was running the workshops in England in the mid 90s, I was sometimes the same age as the people in the workshop. I knew I simply could provide what they didn't necessarily have. That was and is the dynamic. The term mentor only comes in retrospect.

My mentor for at least fifteen years when I lived in South Carolina was a woman called Ellen Arl. But if I ever said *Ellen Arl, you are my mentor*, she would have upbraided me. She'd have said *Don't you dare call me that! Why are you saying this?* In retrospect, I can say she mentored me as a teacher. She mentored me as a poet. She mentored me in tremendous ways. But the relationship was my sitting at the feet of someone I respected and valued who was also my friend.

In terms of your question, what I knew (in England) was these were talented people, and the systems we lived in had not given them the chance to get their work out there. But I also knew and *still know* that I cannot be alone as a successful writer. That is asinine. I want to be part of a movement. Movements move the world. Individuals barely shift things. We know this because when you

are in a world in which the dominant culture is operating as if it is individuals functioning, it's a lie. They are a movement. Until you create a force of voices, varied, of all kinds, but coming through that same prism of saying *We own a tradition, a history, an aesthetic*, until that happens, the individual goes only so far and no farther. For me, there's a vested interest in being part of a movement of writers who are seriously building themselves and each other.

For me, there's a vested interest in being part of a movement of writers who are seriously building themselves and each other.

Then, one of the great tragedies—and this is why we ended up calling it the Afro Style School—was there was a presumption that your training as a writer was predicated entirely on a kind of Western European aesthetic. Because it was assumed that's all that existed. But I came into the workshop with models that belonged to another tradition. It was a comparable tradition and it had legitimacy and it had efficacy. It was a basis upon which writers could create their work. I could say to a young woman who was doing performance poetry, "Have you read Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf?*" She would say, "But that is old," and I'd say, "No, no, no, no! She's been doing this stuff since long before you even thought of doing it. She's already left a legacy." If you don't know that it's there to learn from, then you're kidding around. For me, it's constantly a process of saying *The collective is important*. The only requirement I would ever articulate is if you are

grateful for this, then when somebody else comes to you, don't dismiss them. Help. To me—I think this is Jamaican, I think this is Ghanaian—there are few things worse than ingratitude in those cultures.

Abani: Yes.

Dawes: It's not a good thing. No. Ingratitude is obscene, and—

Abani: It not only offends the person you are grateful to; it offends your own spirit. So your own spirit turns against you.

Dawes: Yes. What we were and are involved in building is not a mentorship structure. What we are building is a movement. A community. A network of relationships. We are giving space to individuals to find their voices, and a place to go. The rest absolutely takes care of itself.

Sappenfield: So that went on in Britain, but did it go on elsewhere?

Abani and Dawes: It's everywhere.

Abani: We've done it in Southern Africa and other places. It keeps on going. All of it comes out of those initial workshops. Wouldn't you say?

Dawes: Yes.

Abani: There's Bernadine running the Brunel Prize. There's Malika's Poetry Kitchen...

Dawes: Malika Booker started off working with a bunch of younger writers, along with Roger Robinson, to sustain the spirit of the Afro Style School. Soon some of these younger poets took it over and named it Malika's Kitchen. They've been a dynamic and exciting collective of black British poets since. That's the next generation of the work. I still get invited back, as a kind of "elder," to work with these younger people. But here's the interesting thing: Wherever we go, we do this work. When Chris was in California, after he left England, he was doing this work. In South Carolina, I started the South Carolina Poetry Initiative. So many writers have emerged out of that. Then I was generously invited to become a faculty member with

Cave Canem. Cave Canem is a remarkable model of this concept. Chris has also been a faculty member with them. We are part of the African American community in that sense. In terms of Caribbean literature, I do work with the Calabash International Literary Festival, and that's been part of the work.

Sappenfield: You started that festival, did you not?

Dawes: Yes, with Colin Channer and Justine Henzell.

Abani: Don't forget the press: Peepal Tree.

Dawes: Yes, Peepal Tree Press. I'm the associate poetry editor for that press, which remains the leading publisher of Caribbean literature in the world and has been such for almost two decades. Again, the model for that is to *find* and *develop* writers. When we talk about editing, we are talking about working with a writer intimately to find their greatest voice. Our main goal is not always fixing a manuscript for publication. Sometimes we don't publish. But we are still talking to writers for three years, four, five, before the book comes together. What we are trying to do is be there with them as they grow and develop. Why? We've experienced both the sensation of not having anybody there with us and having somebody there with us, and we prefer having somebody with us. We think most people prefer to have somebody with them.

Sappenfield: It creates a sense of strength and confidence?

Abani and Dawes: Yes.

Sappenfield: A foundation that a writer can move forward from?

Abani: It's also an understanding that in the process of helping someone as a whole, not of helping them become a single product, you're not creating someone who owes you anything.

We know that what we've done with these African poets, they would have reached without us, though it might have taken ten more years. What we're trying to do is to develop the idea in someone that success is best when

there's a lot of people around you who are equally successful.

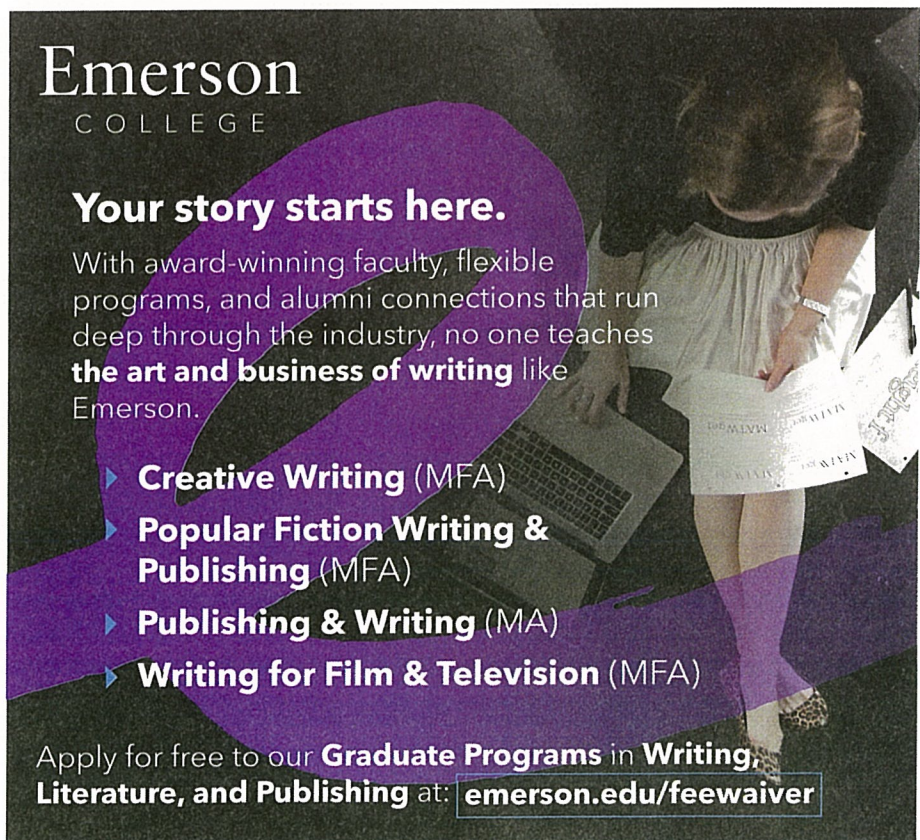
The mentorship shows you how to help someone else. And you help the next person. It's not done with a sense of obligation; it's done with a sense of joy. I started Black Goat Press for this reason. Because this type of nurturing creates something organic: the understanding that service is part of the craft. Being a citizen of literature is part of the craft. And it extends to all kinds of things. Often, you're doing it invisibly. Often you're helping people in so many ways. A person whose letter you wrote that put them in a tenure position, for example. All these things are happening, not because we want recognition, but because the sheer act of having, say, lots of female writers, or lots of female writers of color, lots of male writers of color, it's a community.

Say a publisher asks me to recommend a writer, then I just sit down for an hour and go through who I can recommend. I'm not just looking at the work, but who this person wants to be.

And then publication happens. I don't speak about it because it's not about that. It's about a network. A presence. A community that builds an aesthetic tradition that becomes a movement of which we're simply a part. We don't own it. It's never a top-down idea. It's a different approach to the idea of mentorship. We're trying to create something so another group of people can step in and continue it. A different generation. A different aesthetic.

Part of it has to do with a previous generation saying *I made it through, so I'm going to make sure others don't to secure my place*. In London, when all this started, Kwame was viewed with skepticism by other established writers of color. Sometimes helping other people can cost you. If someone is smart, and they watch the dynamic, that's part of where the respect comes from. You know this help came at a cost to themselves, from a belief in a larger principle.

Sappenfield: Would you say this mode of nurturing writers is influenced by your heritages?



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Dawes: In some ways. But it may be more specific than national or cultural heritage. My father, Neville Dawes, was a novelist and a poet, who I think, because of the pressures of family and so forth, probably didn't do all the work he wanted to do. But for the entire decade of the 1970s, he was responsible for the emergence of so many writers who were quietly working with him. I watched the care he took with their work. I watched him working with Lorna Goodison. I watched him think about Jamaica's connection with Africa. I watched him bring writers from Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, to Jamaica, literally to change the way we think about Africa in that country. He did it at a major cost to himself, and, I would argue, to his life as a writer.

The mentorship shows you how to help someone else. And you help the next person. It's not done with a sense of obligation; it's done with a sense of joy.

Just the other day I was reading a newspaper article in which he was quoted, explaining what was happening with these projects. It was hilarious because I thought it was me. Seriously. I had not looked at it in years. He was talking about starting a press and starting to publish Caribbean writers. Some of it, I think I inherited from him. And then my mother was a social worker and an artist. So for me, there is a sense in which the individual does not have to protect themselves from success by putting down other people. That idea to me is just... Look, I don't expect all

writers—or even most writers—to do this work.

Abani: It's not a requirement.

Dawes: It's not. Everybody has a life and their own thing, so I'm not saying *Oh, those people, they're bad*. I do think the people we gather to work with us, they understand the value of this work. And somebody who doesn't, it can be complicated—

Abani: They may not have the disposition.

Dawes: Right.

Abani: And if they don't have it, they may be damaging someone while they're trying to help.

Dawes: I've been in teaching since I was a teenager, and any of us who have been in teaching for years...well, some people shouldn't teach.

Abani: It's a skill and a vocation.

Dawes: My view of helping others comes from that familial legacy, but it also comes from a cultural legacy. From the dynamic of living as an immigrant in this country. It comes from facing the personal struggle...

Abani: The difficulty.

Dawes: ...of not seeing success for various reasons, whether it's the work that I do that's not up to scratch, or the doors closed before me, and then saying *My disposition will be to facilitate, rather than to block*. The people who I gather around me, as I get older, are increasingly the people who believe this. I don't have time to hang with those who are not of that ilk.

Abani: Or to try to convince them to come on board.

Sappenfield: Mentoring relationships tend to work best when there's a baseline chemistry. You two certainly seem to have this on many levels. For example, in that same Lannan interview, Chris, you said the two of you are frequently "codeswitching," and "straddling" multiple genres and identities. Can you speak to this?

Abani: It's constantly going on. We'll share a look across a room and so forth. There's the notion of someone who's helping you and you become friends, but there's also the kinds of people who can be friends, and that comes down to how you support each other. In profound ways and in simple ways.

So that's also part of it. Not everybody you work with ends up being a close friend, but there is a goodwill that's available. We had similar fathers. My father also trained at Oxford. He was an educator. My mother was an activist. So those two things existed, and I was allowed access to art in profound ways. Also, I grew up largely in Igbo communities where the role of grandparents and lineage were very important, so a lot of what people think is my intelligence, or my wisdom, is actually from illiterate people who didn't have a formal Western education, but who were smarter and will always be smarter. There, the idea was that you're an individual, as long as your individuality is not destructive to the community. And the community has expectations of you, as long as it doesn't stifle your individuality. You're a kind of communal individual. There's a give-and-take all the time.

People have an appreciation of your gift, without it having to be established in a hierarchy. Say you have a young man who sings in stunning ways. Then you'll have a hard-nosed businessman, or even a thug or killer, and they'll call this kid over and say *Sing, we want to hear this thing you do*. It encourages you because people are proud. That is also part of it, how your gift is given recognition and valued because it contributes to our complex humanness, and not because somebody outside has said you are important. You are important because you are offering something. Does that make sense?

Sappenfield: Absolutely.

Abani: This is not to say that African American communities aren't like this. A lot of communities still have all this in place. Even within this complex moment in time. I would suggest that before capitalism became the transaction-

al craziness that it is now, even within white America, you had all this. Because it's agrarian. It's rural. Within those kinds of contexts, you are mentored within a larger community. All of that is important to bear in mind.

I think that's what most people are yearning for when they come to workshop. It's never articulated properly, so what happens then is that when you're in the work and trying to help, it's read as a rejection. The person responds by thinking *But I want to belong here*. Yet it's *No, it's because you belong here that we're saying these things*. This happens because there's no other model for them outside the workshop. Part of being a good workshop teacher or facilitator is that you're constantly juggling energies in a profound way. Imagine the risk, at times, for a workshop leader. Trying to balance the students' emotional needs, which they're not actually trained for, and shouldn't be in charge of. They're trying to give suggestions, within the context of what is a realistic expectation, and also trying to carry them

forward. Ironically, people come to me in workshop saying they feel unsafe, sometimes before any work has actually begun, when actually, I'm thinking *I'm the most unsafe feeling person here, but I'm trying to hold you all*. That said, what I think makes workshops function is a drive toward something bigger than us. It allows us to mitigate what could become quite difficult on an individual ego basis.

Sappenfield: With this lack of mentor/mentee distinction, did you transition to friendship naturally?

Dawes: Yes, but I should caution about that. We're not friends because we're writers. We're friends because we share a commonality. It's this: If you said to me *Create a hierarchy of the things important in your life*, writing would not be at the top. It wouldn't be second. It probably wouldn't even be third or fourth. Which sounds like anathema in certain circles, but because of that, if you ask about friendship—friendship, not acquaintanceship—you begin to realize

that it is not predicated on us being writers. The joy I feel in Chris Abani's work is because it's brilliant, so I enjoy it. But even as I'm reading it, I know it's the Chris Abani who will stand up and pretend to be a cockroach, and it will be the funniest thing in the world. That's the same guy. To me this is not complicated. We work together, and there's the gratitude about writing and so on and so forth. It's just how we encourage each other.

Abani: Can I add one thing?

Dawes: Yes.

Abani: I was in London working on novels. The amount of work—pages—this man has read for me. I was getting frustrated, watching other people with the talent in my pinkie finger becoming *names*. (By the way, Kwame had many years where no one knew who he was.) One day, I told Kwame, "I think I'm going to quit." He didn't say anything.

A bit later, he was in London for an event. He called me to see if I could bring a guitar for him to play there. I

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said I'd get him one. "Great," he said, "meet me at Victoria Station." When we met, he gave me a book. His new one that had just come out. He signed it and said, "Don't look at this till I'm on the train." We had a coffee and talked as friends talk. When he got on the train, I opened the book and he'd written in patois *Chris, You and I will play in the same band soon. Until then prepare a fine music.* It kept me going.

Then, interestingly, I lent this book to a student in Riverside, and the book disappeared. Fast forward to Kwame reading at Brown... two years ago?

Dawes: Yes, two years.

Abani: This student of mine, turned up. She'd bought a copy of that book, and she asked Kwame to sign it. Then she said, "Here's Chris's copy." He took it, added something to the inscription, and sent it back to me.

Now, if someone else had written that, I would have thought *How condescending.* But because it came from him, it sustained me. It lifted me from a moment when I would have walked away. A year later, *Kalakuta Republic* came into the world, with its introduction by Kwame. Our friendship is something more fundamental.

I was preparing to do a reading once and I was nervous. Kwame said to me, "The things I worry about? Driving down the street at night with my kids, and some drunk driver hits us." So, a reading? In perspective? I'm always Chris, and he's always Kwame, and family always comes first, being a human comes first. That's what the bond is for us, having another being who can hold that for you and say *Ya mon, you're okay.* Everything else is just on top and on top and on top of that. Would you agree?

Dawes: That's accurate.

Sappenfield: How does this translate into your teaching in other environments?

Abani: For my part, I think there are two ways to think about this. Part of what you're referring to is the African Poetry Book Fund. To how a thing is born. Taking us back to the Afro Style School,

Kwame was doing stuff in the 90s. Then I was doing stuff in California. Then he was doing stuff in South Carolina. Then we were on poetry tour in Southern Africa; we gently called it *Babylon by Bus.* As we traveled around we encountered poets, and we were stunned by their work. And saddened because there was no vehicle for its appearance into the world. We ended up discussing this problem on that bus, and it's how the whole thing started. We said *We have to make a space for this.*

All the experience we had was brought to bear, but then there was finding who could hold this and sustain it without struggle. The group of us who created it were like a band: we

a whole poetics from northern Africa to its southernmost tip, from the easternmost to the westernmost parts. And we want the poets to drive it, so we're always looking for ways for that conversation to expand. That kind of creation is easy because it's driven by something bigger than us. Even the poet coming into it is stunned by the mentorship, that they could get published, that we don't make any money. Naturally, it feeds into itself.

The same principles are brought into an individual mentorship in a workshop. I do this wherever I teach. The question, though, is this: Is there a collective ideology underpinning this, or are we just trying to help individual

I'm always Chris, and he's always Kwame, and family always comes first, being a human comes first. That's what the bond is for us, having another being who can hold that for you and say *Ya mon, you're okay.* Everything else is just on top and on top and on top of that.

knew who could play what parts well. Thus, we've never had a situation where someone said *Hey, how come you're the bandleader?* We all just know that's what they're good at. Without them, there would be no band.

What brought us to do this was a certain kind of humility, and a certain kind of sadness. There was a similar attempt to do this before us, but the program didn't sustain itself because of the naivete of that previous generation of writers. They didn't understand capitalism and where it might fall. And they didn't understand passing things along, so they hadn't made enough space for a line of succession. That was the difference.

We're aware that we're trying to create something, not about us, but a space for

writers achieve a book? If so, how does that place them aesthetically? How does that place them in tradition? Who do they understand they are working with and for? And does it generate in them a need to offer this to other people. Or is it just their way to fame? The ideology becomes a vital part of how a thing gets formed. I can assure you that if the African Poetry Book Fund runs out of money tomorrow, and Kwame says to the editorial board *We don't have any money. I need you all to find a way to chip in this amount so we can create the next book,* people will dip into their salaries and find a way to make it happen. If you don't have that kind of dedication, it won't work.

There's never been a time we've fixed a meeting and everyone hasn't turned up.

At times, we've said to other editorial members on the board *We could publish you so you could get your tenure*, and they've said *No, that looks like I'm being favored and messes up what we're trying to do. And what does that say to the young people coming in?* This is the group of people we're working with. And like Kwame said, he gathers a certain ilk.

Marianne Kunkel, Kwame's former managing editor at *Prairie Schooner* (who, by the way, was the inaugural managing editor for the African Poetry Book Fund), he's helped her. I see, in everything she writes, she thanks him. Everything in the future, she calls Kwame about. In an ideal situation for workshop you'll have, say, eight people: maybe three you can take somewhere. It depends upon the individual. If their drive is not to become a writer, but to become published, we can help you with that, too, but then you're limiting for yourself what could happen for you. Because you can publish a book, and that would be the end of it. And then how do you replicate it. If it comes from somewhere, a foundation, then it will go somewhere.

Sappenfield: Do you think Americans have trouble giving themselves permission to ask that much of a mentor. Does your mentoring instill that it isn't too much?

Dawes: It's a little more than that. What you do is develop a relationship that removes that anxiety. You are constantly saying *Check with me, it's fine. Check with me, it's fine.* But I don't sit here having expectations that people I work with will always be contacting me. It's like with my kids: I tell them *Make your own decisions, but you know I'm here if you need me.*

Abani: The fact that people stay in touch is also an individual thing. We don't create a dependency. We try to help people not need anything anymore. Then *they* can become the giver to other people. Because they see that the vision of what we've modeled is bigger than them, then they want to be part of it. But I can't go into an individual workshop scenario and say *Wouldn't*

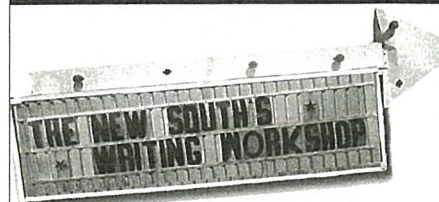
that be great if we could all... because people would start devolving in front of me. Because of their own anxieties.

Dawes: Let's clarify: The work we're doing here, I'm not trying to develop relationships with individual people necessarily. We're creating a framework in which, for multiple reasons, you feel as if your work is valued in that place.

Half the work we do, really, is not done by us. It's done by the writers talking with each other. Because they feel as if they're moving toward something. They read each other. We say to them *We are bringing you these other writers, your peers, and they are there for you.*

People do not feel they can call me or

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Chris anytime. When they come saying *Can I ask you a question?* what they are saying is *You've told us we need to do the work, but when we need it, you are there for us. I am part of this. Of this intellectual, dynamic space and it's been valued.* That is gold. So when we say mentoring programs, I think sometimes we've presumed, and probably wrongly so...

Abani: A shared value.

Dawes: ...a shared value. I'll give you a simple example. With the African Poetry Book Fund, we say *Okay, we're going to do a chapbook series.* Right? This is a box set of books by African poets. That is not predicated by my saying *Here's this poet who I want.* The first thing we do is I contact all the people I know in the different countries who have connections with writers. I'll say *Is there anybody that you think is gifted and talented? Ask them to send work. Give me their names.* I look them up. We find more about them. We write to them, ask for a manuscript. They have two weeks to put together a chapbook. This is all they're hearing. So far, we're not friends; we have no relationship. But something has already started to happen. The person sitting in Ghana or Lagos thinks *Somebody out there is saying my work is important.* The structure is as critical a part of this idea of nurturing as is the individual's relationship with it. When they send the work in, we then review it, and everyone who sends in work and asks for comment, regardless of publication, gets a note back from me. We don't know them. The note is about the work, and that is transformative. It means that somebody has looked at their work and paid attention to it and valued it. Then, if we say *Okay we'll publish it,* most of the writers we've never met. Most of the communication is by email.

Where is the mentoring? We have an event in New York, and a young man runs up and hugs me. I've never met him, but I have communicated with him extensively. The structure we've built is a home. A home that values them for their work. That is transformative. In some instances, it will become one-on-one. In others, they'll develop it with somebody else. But they are af-

firmed by the humanity and care with which their work is looked at.

Abani: Also, they realize that they're not alone because there's a kid in Morocco and a kid in Lagos, and they read each other's work. They realize they're talking about the same things. Suddenly they're not isolated anymore. This is not intentional; we simply deal with the work. Even someone's sexuality, which may have been used to demean them, may appear in publication, transforming them as a human being. That comes from approaching the work itself, and through that, they are more human. Also, we want the books to be a living archive.

that's forced or policed or that we have to organize. *They* organize. *They* come together. That means it's going to keep growing and living because it has become an organism. Our job is mostly curation, how to establish it in terms of value and a larger international construct. But we're not picking the canon in that way; we're just picking work.

Because it's blind submissions, we can end up with a chapbook that's filled by ten women. It's a phenomenon in itself, telling us that these are the people doing interesting work at this moment. Then, suddenly, the young men are scrambling to adapt. What's happening—maybe for the first time in recent

The fact that people stay in touch is also an individual thing. We don't create a dependency. We try to help people not need anything anymore. Then they can become the giver to other people. Because they see that the vision of what we've modeled is bigger than them, then they want to be part of it.

Dawes: That's right.

Abani: You can already see that the writers are reading each other because sometimes we get new submissions, and there will be epigraphs from previous chapbooks. We realize they're talking to each other in their poems. That has nothing to do with us. It's organic. They're all proud to belong to this home. An aesthetic home, but also a human home for them.

We've facilitated readings where we've brought them over from Africa. We've just sat in the back. They did the whole reading. Then they all went off to dinner by themselves. We see how excited they are with each other, and we realize the thing they are craving they have found. It's not a community

African letters—is women are determining the conversation. We didn't set it up that way. It wasn't affirmative action. The work spoke for itself.

I think all mentoring programs need to consider what it is they're trying to do and why they're trying to do it. Everything predicates itself on that idea.

AWP

H.E., Heather Sappenfield writes fiction and nonfiction for adults and children. Her fiction has won or been a finalist for many awards, including the Danahy Fiction Prize, the *Writer's Digest* Contest, and the Flannery O'Connor Award. She's also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her novels are *The View From Who I Was* and *Life at the Speed of Us*, which was a finalist for the Colorado Book Awards.