

Transcript for Creative Conversations with Tracey Baptiste and Ibi Zoboi (I, Too, Arts Collective)

Episode Duration: 66 minutes

RENÉE WATSON: Good evening. Good evening. Welcome to the Langston Hughes House. My name is Renée Watson, and I'm the Executive Director of I, Too Arts Collective. I'm very excited about tonight's conversation and honored to have Ibi and Tracey here because I respect them as fellow writers. And I love them as personal friends. So, it's the best when you can have, you know... I have the best of both worlds, colleagues that I love and friends that are so good to me. So, we are going to begin the evening and I will introduce Ibi and Tracey. And then, they will read from their books, and they will be in conversation. We'll take questions from the audience. So, as they are having their conversation, if you have a question, hold on to that because we'll have time for you to engage with them that way. And then, we'll close with a book signing at the very end.

Ibi Zoboi holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her writing has been published in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Horn Book Magazine*, and *The Rumpus* among others. Her debut novel, *American Street*, has received five stars reviews. It was just long-listed for the National Book Award. Ibi was born in Haiti and immigrated to New York with her mother when she was four years old. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, their three children, and three turtles.

Tracey was born in Trinidad where she grew up on jumpy stories and fairytales. Her first novel, *Angel's Grace*, was named one of the 100 best books for reading and sharing by New York City librarians. She's a wife and mom that lives in New Jersey where she writes and edits books for kids from a very cozy office in her house that is filled with more toys than she can count, and she is the author of *The Jumbies* and *Rise of the Jumbies*. This is her launch, it just came out. We're really excited to have her here tonight. As I mentioned.... Yeah, you can give her some love. [Applause]

Both Ibi and Tracey love young people and how words can impact the lives of children. They have been supportive of I, Too Arts Collective from day one, when this was just a small, little, tiny dream. They have been with me from the very beginning. And like I said, I'm so honored and grateful for the friendship. And I am grateful that they volunteer with us and give of themselves. And so, tonight is a celebration of their worth and I'm excited to have them come. So, would you please welcome Ibi and Tracey? [Applause]

TRACEY BAPTISTE: So, wait, who you want to be first? I feel like the National Book Award Longlist.

IBI ZOBOI: It's your launch.

TRACEY: So, yes, But next, that's what I was about to say...

IBI: Okay, you go last. Yes, yes.

TRACEY: The National Book Award Longlist should go first.

IBI: Okay, and we'll close out with you. Thank you all for coming, it's a nice cozy crowd. I love cozy crowds. That-that means that we're going to go all out and be our authentic selves, the whole bat. So, *American Street*, is more than an immigrant novel. We're going to talk about it, okay. I am going to read a passage that kind of encapsulates this idea of moving from one broken place to another broken place. By broken, I mean, a city that's developing our third world countries, like Haiti, that's dealing with disenfranchisement on many levels. And it's described as one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. And Detroit is one of the poorest cities in the United States. So, this scene just shows two girls kind of taking tabs on whose city or whose country is the worst.

I must be the only one who can hear Bad Leg's song tonight. Chantal is still as a rock on her bed, and the window is closed. His song is loud, but I can't understand his words. I toss every which way trying to shut out his voice. My eyes are weary. My thoughts are on overtime refusing to let me sleep. Everything and everyone swims around my mind like ghosts in a haunted house. The detective lady, her proposition, Kasem, and his shit you do for fam, and the love that Donna has for a bad guy who sold drugs that killed a girl. I am being forced to make a choice. I know that my prayers will ease my heart, so I get up. My legs take me down the steps to the coat closet, out of the house, and to the corner of American Street and Joy Road. What should I do is the first thing I ask Papa Legba. I need straight answers, so I ask the straight question. He's quiet. There are sirens in the distant, a dog barks, the wind howls around me, and I realize how strange this place is with all these little houses. And on most days, I barely see any people. If there was a place like this back in Haiti, anyone would come out and gather on the sidewalk to exchange meals and gossip. No one would be left alone in a tiny house with only their regrets and sorrows to keep them company. Papa Legba finally begins.

Crossroads cross paths. Double cross and cross examine. Cross a bridge or cross my mind. A cross to bear, a cross to lie. And cross the street and cross town. Cross out. Cross off. Cross your T's and cross your fingers, then nail him to a cross, as you cross your heart and hope not to die. A cigar appears in his hand. He's never had it before. He takes a pull and exhales thick white smoke that swirls up into the air like a cloud. I watch it bend and stretch like a slow turning cyclone until it stops at the street signs where Joy Road meets American Street. Joy and American, a crossroads intersecting. One is not the other. I look down Joy Road with its few street lights dotting the wide path. There are not that many houses and lots of open land. It can either mean endless possibilities or dark empty [inaudible]. I look down American Street, with its houses and neat rows and open locks like missing teeth. I know so many people back in Haiti. So many families who would kiss the ground and thank Jesus for a street like this, especially one named American. My two paths meet at the corner and it seems like I have to choose one. One street represents a future, the other leads to a different kind of life. Papa Legba, the keeper of the

crossroads, will help me choose one. On American Street, I will live with my Aunt Jo and my cousins and go to school and have a cute boyfriend and keep my mouth shut because in Haiti I learned not to shake hands with the devil. But on Joy Road, I will tell the truth. The truth will lead to my happiness and I will drive long and far without anything in my way, like the path to New Jersey, to my mother, to her freedom, to my Joy. Which road should I take, Papa Legba? When I turn back to the streetlight, he is gone.

The light only shines on the overturned plastic bucket in the dancing smoke. It's beginning to feel as if I'm speaking to stagnant air. The spirits are just standing there without delivering my message to God. "Where were you?" Chantal whispers as I quietly slid back onto my mattress. "Eating something in kitchen." I lie. "Yeah, right. You trying to get killed out here on these streets?" "Killed," I say. "I feel safer here than I did in Port-au-Prince." Chantal laughs. I wait for her to stop, but she keeps going. Then she sits up on here bed to face me, I can see the outline of her head in the moonlight. "You ever seen a kid get stumped in the face with boots?" "No," I say. "Not stumped in the face, but beaten with a baton on the back by police?" "Oh, ya'll got police brutality, too?" "It was because of the manifestation before election. What you would call a protest, like the one for that girl who died because of the drugs. Did they find out who gave her those drugs?" She's quiet. Then she says, "Does it matter? She took them, right. If somebody hands you drugs and you take them, who's to blame? What? There are no drugs in Haiti?" "Of course, there are, and drug dealers too. But, they don't always have to deal drugs. There are other things to sell." "Well, did you ever have to dodge bullets?" "During carnival, some people were jumping on cars to dance and have a good time, but I thought they were making trouble. So, they shot, and we ran." "Okay," she says settling back down on her pillow. "Do you know what a dead body smells like? I mean, after it's been dead for like days." "Yes, I remember the earthquake very well," I say quiet, almost whispering. "All right, then, you win."

[Applause]

TRACEY BAPTISTE: So, I was having a hard time picking one to read. And I decided that I would read a bunch of little things. And then, I realized that all the little things were about Jumbies, and not about people at all. So, when the book opens, there's an earthquake. And the earthquake, sort of, dislodges something from the ocean. And so, this is the first creature that you meet in this story.

Beneath the tangle of boats and nets, the ocean floor emerged. Sand rose up mudding the water. Schools of fish were shaking out of the coral. [10:00] Rocks covered in barnacles and layers of sediment is lodged and knocked against each other. As they tumbled, they opened hidden chasms, like a bottle finally free of its cork. In the darkness of a newly opened chamber, a gnarled shriveled looking creature shifted and then shifted again, as if it was testing out its new space. Long twig thin fingers reached out from under the rocks and folded into the fissures of the stone above. The fingers pushed the stone stretching the chasm wide like the jaws of a beast.

So, that's the first creature that you meet, or the kids meet, in the story. But of course, there's a whole bunch more. There's Mama D'Leau. Mama D'Leau's the worst of all of the Jumbies. She

was in charge of the mermaids. And instead of a fish's tail, she's an anaconda's tail. And so, here we meet Mama D'Leau.

Mama D'Leau sucked the marrow out of a long thin bone, as she lay on the seafloor. She could feel the currents of water circling the island like they were her own fingers. But now, some currents were moving under a new force. That twiggy thing she had seen rising out of the rocks, it was not right. The creature knew it didn't belong. But, it was one like her, an ancient. And how do they all agree at once? It was such a long time now. She could barely summon up the memory of it. But, there were words spoken. Boundaries settled. It was no small thing to violate that understanding, and here was this other Jumbie tugging at her currents, testing her patience. Mama D'Leau tossed the bone and picked herself off the bottom of the sea, and swam toward the waves. They were golden in the sunlight. Her eyes would change to match. It was a matter of camouflage, a little trait that kept her hidden in the water. So, she only looked like a harmless shape, like nothing at all, until it was too late. A school of flying fish darted up and out of the water gleaming silver and pink. It glided in the air leaving a trail of droplets behind them before diving back into the sea. Mama D'Leau swam near the surface to meet them. She grabbed one by the tail. It was pretty. She smiled before biting down, leaving a gaping hole in its fat belly. She crunched the scales and fins and bones, and slurped the guts and thought about what she was going to do about this other Jumbie, the one who was towing the line between the water world and the land.

Mama D'Leau could feel the Jumbie's fear shivering through her, as she moved about. It was a reason the other Jumbie did not want to be on land. The people probably hated her. Mama D'Leau laughed. This was why it was better under the water. No people to disturb her, only the ones she chose.

So, then we meet the mermaids, which, I think, is like the thing that everybody like loves. They're all like Mermaids. So, yeah, they are. They don't show up until page 59.

Mama D'Leau hummed deep in her throat and from mermaids arrived. Each with dark skin, a long fish tail, and beautifully braided hair. The longest one had a flashing green tail with fins that spread like delicate chiffon. She held the hand of a smaller greenish blue mermaid, who was plainer than the first, but who had a striking line like liquid gold down her middle. The third was silvery at the tips of her fins with blue scales that darkened toward her belly. The last one, the smallest who swam ahead of the others, was dark yellow with bright red at the tip of her fins. The ends of her tail looked frayed like cloth, and one side was longer than the other, as if a piece of it had been ripped away. The mermaid swam to a stop just in front of Corrinne. Mama D'Leau loomed over them, but bowed her head to each and whispered something in a language Corrinne could not make out. The mermaids looked puzzled at Mama D'Leau's words. But once she had finished, they nodded and took a position next to each of the children. The smallest one with her slender arms and fiery tail went to Corrinne. Her hair was cornrowed in an intricate pattern of swirls in one side, and dropped and flowed past her shoulders. Like Mama D'Leau, she had adorned her hair, but her braids were twined with rocks and shells at the crown and ends, instead of with small crawling creatures. And like Mama D'Leau, her scales started to thin from her stomach to her shoulders, which were sun worn brown like Corrinne's. The biggest one who

was both long and curly had a smear on her face from where she stopped next to Bouki. Her hair was flat twisted against her scalp in a perfect spiral like a snail's shell. It was pinned into a bun at the back of her neck with bits of coral. She flipped her silver tail, and leaned in close to sniff him as though he was a snack. Bouki's mouth turned down and his skin paled. He looked like he might throw up. He tried to move away from the mermaid, but the seaweed kept him anchored. Then, he swayed like an upside-down pendulum. The mermaid next to Dru had hair that was plaited like Corrinne's, but in smaller sections that looked like a hundred long thin braids hanging to her wide hips. Malik's mermaid had her hair in fat cornrows and followed the shape of her head, and fell in layers against her scales. All the mermaids looked at Corrinne in the front with something that resembled disgust and curiosity.

So, I really wanted to spend some time describing what the mermaids looked like because my experience with brown mythological creatures is that they are not beautiful when they are portrayed. And so, we did take our time and to make sure that you know what they look like. I'm not that gorgeous. So, this part that we're going to read next is actually the part that was the hardest part for me to write. And, I remember there was one day we were at your house. We were in Ibi's living room, and I was working on the book. And I was, like, almost in tears because I couldn't figure this out. Do you remember this? And I... I was just really having a really hard time because for me this was like the biggest part of the story, even though it's not Corrinne's story. This part is not about Corrinne at all. It's not about the main character at all. It's really not the mermaids, and I... I was like almost in tears trying to figure out how to do it. And all of these ladies are here giving me strength to get through this part. So, this is after the mermaids take Corrinne and her friends and they have... they're going back across the Atlantic Ocean towards the coast of Ghana, and they encounter a sunken ship.

The mermaids began to laugh and chatter as they pulled Corrinne and her friend through the broken ship discovering more of the buried treasure. They found delicate cups that they tossed at each other and plates to fling back. Malik and Addi took a couple of the utensils and beat a hasty rhythm in the hall. The muted thunk of the spoons changed to a light clang as they moved to another part of the ship. Ci-Ci and the girls swam toward the sound. A square opening lead even deeper into the ship below the surface of the sand. Ci-Ci clasped the sides of the small portal as if she needed a moment to think. Addi bumped into her and landed on a piece of rusted chain. It must have been what she and Malik had hit a moment before. "It's heavy," Malik said trying to pull the chain up. Addi hit it again with her spoon when the sound rang out. The spoon broke about in her hand and her smile disappeared. Ci-Ci dove into the dark belly of the ship. There crushed boards pushed up at odd intervals through the soft ocean floor, but the sides remained nearly intact. Beams curved over their heads like the arches of a church. Even spaced along the beams were large round circles, iron from which more chains hung. They were so heavy and stiff with rust, they didn't move when Corrinne touched them. Ci-Ci pulled one of the chains. It was huge in her hands, and it groaned and screeched as the rough, rusted links rubbed against each other. Ci-Ci kept pulling until the links stuck on something on something beneath the sand. By then, the other mermaids had joined them, and they huddled in a circle waiting to see what

would come up. Corrinne unclasped one of her hands and helped Ci-Ci pull, but the chain wouldn't budge. All of them lined up and pulled until the chain snapped sending up a cloud of sand and red flecks of dust. When the sand settled, they saw the end of the chain, a round iron clasp with a hinge. The clasp was large enough to close around a wrist. Below it, a white rock protruded from the sand. Corrinne reached for it, feeding her finger into a groove at the top that reminded her of the curve in her mother's stone, only it wasn't as hard and something about it sent a child through her body. She dug around and uncovered more of the rock. It was long and white and still entangled in another part of the chain. When she pulled, it came free. Startled, Corrinne let go and it hovered in the water in front of them before slowly settling back to the sand. Not a rock, a bone.

[Applause]

IBI: Yep.

TRACEY: I know. I almost cried. I was like... ohh, just get to the end.

IBI: I'm going to jump right in. Anyone who knows me, like, I dive in deep. [20:00] I don't do small talk. Reading *The Jumbies* and knowing who you are as a person, I think this is why I decided to write for children. I made a clear decision because I went to get a MFA in Writing for children and young adults. And before that, I wanted to apply to a program in California called The Pacifica Graduate Institute, and I wanted to get a PhD in Mythological Studies.

Joseph Campbell, who's problematic, the late Joseph Campbell, who's kind of known for *The Hero's Myth* or *The Hero's Journey* from his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, his papers are housed in that university. And I wanted to kind of, like, take his work with mythology and real mythology and just push it forward somehow with academic work. But, I have three kids and that sounded like a lot to do. And so, I... I didn't settle. I opted for a writing for children and young adults program, specifically for mythology and folklore, writing mythology and folklore into books. This is, what you did with *The Jumbies*, is what I was trying to sell ten years ago as part of my first novel.

TRACEY: Nobody wanted it then. Right? Nobody wanted it then.

IBI: Right. Right. And I... because... and I wanted to study mythology and folklore because we both come from such rich cultures. I'm Haitian, and Haitian Vodou has such a rich pantheon very much like Greek or Roman mythology. I think, even more so because vodou is West African Benin Delmas Catholicism and Native American folklore and mythology kind of boiled down into a stew somehow. And I think it's even richer. I think, you know, what can you say to this idea that we work, you know... the work that we do in pulling from our culture to put it on the page. And I think that's like, you know, kind of like your mermaids there, too.

TRACEY: You know, I always write about them all deep.

IBI: Right.

TRACEY: And, what we get a lot in children's literature is mythology about European or American culture. I mean, there's a whole lot of worlds out there. And everybody has very similar stories, and we still are not getting a lot of those. Yeah, so, I started collecting Cinderella stories from all over the world when I was in graduate school, uh, because I was going to be a classroom teacher. I was going to teach kindergarten, and we're going to read all the Cinderella stories from everywhere, right. And then, I... the fact that they had all of these mythologies, all of these stories that had basically the same story from all over the place was really fascinating to me. When I came across the Haitian folktale, *The magic orange tree*, I was like here is a great Cinderella story, even better, because she saves herself.

IBI: Yeah.

TRACEY: You know. There is no prince. There is no fairy godmother. There is no crappy shoes. Come on, nobody can wear glasses. That's ridiculous.

IBI: That's what... if that's what we come from in terms of, like, West African tradition. And this is why when somebody asks me if I'm a feminist, I kind of hem and haw because...

TRACEY: Do we? No. You don't.

IBI: Eh...

TRACEY: What?

IBI: The thing is I question it in the back of my mind because we come from certain cultures where the feminism is woven into the mythology. If we kind of disconnect from what colonialization has done to how to, you know, how our actual society's run, in terms of patriarchal society now versus patriarchal mythology is very different because we have so many bad ass female deities and goddesses.

TRACEY: Right.

IBI: That don't filter into society.

TRACEY: But, I think that when they did filter it, I think some of the things that happened because in, you know, *The Jumbies* stories that are all throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, what happened was when these deities tried to become not deities, you know, try to conform to the...

IBI: Western ways.

TRACEY: Exactly, what happened was the women got screwed because all of the jumbies, and the worst ones are women. And as always, some women who's living alone by themselves, trying to have her life and take care of her business, who is the worst kind of jumbie. And it's very disturbing to me that that's a thing that has filtered down into stories that children hear.

IBI: Right.

TRACEY: About, you know, the neighbors. And me growing up in Trinidad, I was sure I knew jumbies. I was certain I knew who they were. I knew their names. I knew where they lived. I

knew they were going to come and suck my blood. I knew exactly what was going to happen, and they were always these older women who were, you know, living by themselves trying to, you know, like have their lives and be strong women. And they were not allowed to have that...

IBI: Right. Now, in Haiti, we don't have jumbies. We have... we have a Mama D'Leau.

TRACEY: Yep.

IBI: Uh, we have Garou. Now, instead of jumbies, we attributed everything to Garou, which is Loup Garou. It's... I think that that's...

TRACEY: It's the same thing.

IBI: It's werewolves.

TRACEY: Because you say, you say, Loup Garou and we say Lagahoo. So, it's really... it's the same guy.

IBI: Right, but no. To us, it's not a guy. What I'm saying is I think the semantics change across culture. I don't know what happened, but the evil woman living by herself was a Loup Garou.

TRACEY: Oh, the woman was Loup Garou?

IBI: Yes, the Loup because I think some of the mythologies was lost across...

TRACEY: Well...

IBI: I don't know what happened. But, we don't have a Jumbies.

TRACEY: You know what happens.

IBI: I do know what happens.

TRACEY: You know exactly what happens.

IBI: We do. We lost our cultures, like the mermaids...

TRACEY: There was a ship, and we all came across it. And everybody was trying to scramble and figure out how to, you know, live.

IBI: That's true.

TRACEY: And that is how things got messed up. That's how your Loup Garou became my Lagahoo.

IBI: And it's... but the same idea is that the older woman living by herself in the edge of the forest...

TRACEY: Right.

IBI: Is watch out for her. She's eating children.

TRACEY: Right.

IBI: She's wreaking havoc.

TRACEY: Yep.

IBI: So, it's this idea that when you're not domesticated, you're not, you know, contributing to society in any way. You're kind of shunned and ousted. So, that is still pervasive in Haiti right now, where you can't be too forthright as a woman, especially if you're older. If you don't have any children, if you're not bound to housework in some way, that you are... watch out for her. She's going to, you know, stab you, take your husband, or eat your children. Eat your children is the worst thing that you could possibly do. So, across the world...

TRACEY: But, they're so small and tender.

IBI: That was actually the first short story I published called, *Old Flesh Song*, which is about soucouyants.

TRACEY: Oh, we were talking about this the other day.

IBI: Right. And my short story was about a nanny who's Caribbean. I'm fascinated with Caribbean nannies in New York.

TRACEY: Yep.

IBI: And it is lots of fodder to play with Caribbean mythology, which is this idea of this older woman without any children of her own. Terrible, terrible. But, in other cultures, they have what? Changelings and the Babigata folktales. And we have that with the Grimm's Fairy Tales as well. So, this is where like feminism. But we... that's folklore. I wanted to talk about, for my book, it's mythology versus folklore. Do-do you think there's a difference?

TRACEY: Like the Papa Legba, you mean?

IBI: It's less folklore, more mythology. Mythology... I wonder what the, you know... I got into it online with some folklore people. There's somebody... there's folklore Thursday. And there's scholars who do. They have PhDs in this stuff. And there's only one program that I know of is at Harvard, and it's on folklore. And they insist that all of these things are folklore, even the vodou pantheon is reduced to folklore or children's stories. Now, the mythology is...

TRACEY: Even with the gods?

IBI: So, they don't see it as, you know... they see it as the plaything because... and that's the dynamic with colonization.

TRACEY: I'm very curious about how they distinguish because for me it's all mythology.

IBI: So, there's Greek mythology, Roman mythology, Egyptian mythology, and everything else is relegated to folklore.

TRACEY: And we can't have mythology is what you're saying to me? You're saying that we, from the Caribbean, can't have mythology? What? Our islands are too small?

IBI: The thing is... the thing is it's not written down in books. That's the thing.

TRACEY: Neither were theirs at the beginning, right? Right? Somebody had to write that down.

IBI: Right.

TRACEY: Which I... which I think is what we're doing, you and I.

IBI: Right.

TRACEY: You and me and a bunch of other people out there are now starting to write these things down.

IBI: And I think that's where the power is. The power dynamic is what cultures are able to preserve their mythology in books.

TRACEY: Right.

IBI: And...

TRACEY: But, who's allowed?

IBI: Who's allowed to preserve their...

TRACEY: Who's allowed?

IBI: And how many, like, retellings of Norse, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Celt, to even...

TRACEY: I'm sick of Thor, by the way. I will go see Ragnarok, though. But, I'm sick of Thor.

IBI: He continues to live on because I think children's book writers constantly, you know, we put out these images, and that mythology lives on. [30:00] And I think when, with Haitian folklore, the Bouki. You have the Uncle Bouki and Ti Malice is actually folklore.

TRACEY: Yeah, Yeah.

IBI: Bouki and Ti Malice is actually two boys, or two... It's almost like...

TRACEY: They're two boys.

IBI: In some stories, it's a dog and a cat.

TRACEY: Oh, really. But, I stole them for... because they're Bouki and Malice stories.

IBI: From Haitian folklore, right.

TRACEY: I stole them from folklore, yeah.

IBI: The folklore is that there are two little troublemakers. And it's allegory for troublemaking. You get into this trouble and here is what happens to you. This is what you tell children. This is not something you tell adults. Papa Legba...

TRACEY: Right, but these... right. They're all meant to be instructive.

IBI: It's something you impart onto adults, right.

TRACEY: They're all meant to be instructive. It's all meant to be controlling behavior, you know, with Bouki and Ti Malice, you know. It is about controlling children's behavior, which is the same with the books. They are about not having kids going running out at night. So, you tell them this story, and they stayed inside.

IBI: Now, how did you find out about the story of Bouki and Ti Malice?

TRACEY: Oh, that's in my, all my, digging around trying to find stories from the Caribbean.

IBI: Now, only one person. There's only one person that I know who preserved that story in books is Diane Augustine's, *The Magic Orange Tree*, only as a collection.

TRACEY: Oh, yes, Diane Augustine's.

IBI: Yes, she passed away. But, she was a white American who went to Haiti and studied all of Haiti's folk tradition and put it in a book. I don't know how. There are Haitians writing down folklore. And it's mostly oral tradition that you would find out about it. But, I did... if it wasn't for her, I personally would not know a lot of Haiti's folktales.

TRACEY: It's very interesting, but she's a white American woman who did that and got it published. And it makes me...

IBI: That's the cross of a lot, a lot of cultures.

TRACEY: Right, but it makes me wonder too because Robert [indiscernible] also.

IBI: Yep. Harold Callender from the forties.

TRACEY: Right. So, you know, it's very interesting to me that, you know, there are people from this culture who can go to the Caribbean and collect the stuff, and then make something of it.

IBI: Right, get paid basically.

TRACEY: Whereas the people from the culture are not. Either, are they not doing same? Or, have they tried to do the same and gotten shutdown? This is the question.

IBI: So, it's like your mermaids. So, in *The Jumbies*, the mermaids, even the people on the island have forgotten who they are.

TRACEY: Right.

IBI: Lost their culture. Lost their stories. But, there's a reason for that.

TRACEY: Yep, there's a... well, the mermaids, themselves, have lost their stories and don't know who they are. And the reason is because of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. You know, they were brought over along with everybody else who is brought over and don't have the memory of it. And for me, it's like here we are. We're sitting here. We don't know where we're from really.

IBI: Right.

TRACEY: You know. You're from Haiti. I'm from Trinidad. We were from someplace else before that, you know. We have ancestry from before that, which we don't know. Because at some point, somebody came on a ship and sailed, right. And then, all of that is lost. And so, for me, the mermaids were that fit where they have been brought. They don't know how it all happened. They have no memory of it, and they have no way to go back and reacquire it, really, because how are they going to do that? There's no... there's no connection for them to be able to really get that back. And I think that was why this part was the hardest part for me to write in this particular story because it was just so painful. It was just so painful to know that that is the truth of what our situation was.

IBI: The Middle Passage.

TRACEY: We know that is the truth of it.

IBI: Right. Now, I'm going to share... because I love mythology. I'm going to share something that I learned that I really apply to everything that I write, and it applies to your book as well. This is something from the Dogon people of Mali. And the Dogon have a system of initiation meaning you don't just become an adult in this society. You are initiated into adulthood. You go through a process of becoming adult and being a member of a society. So, there's four steps to understanding a truth, or a universal truth. The first one is Gedi's sol. Sol is... means words. So, gedi means front. So, the first step of an initiation is word from the front, meaning the surface word, a word at face value. Bena sol is word from the side, the kind of understanding that you've got to do when you go around the corner of a thing to understand it in a certain way, any kind of given truth. And the third one is bolo sol, word from the back. Meaning the kind of critical thinking you have to do to understand the other side of an argument, or the other side of a truth. Sol is the same word. Dieye means word... their... I said, word from the front, word from back.

TRACEY: Side or the back.

IBI: Word from the inside.

TRACEY: Okay.

IBI: The thing that you have to do to dig into a certain kind of truth to get to the seed of it, to get that astonishing truth. An astonishing truth would mean like when we have epiphanies or something, or an a-ha moment, or we can't describe what that is. You know, that thing when you truly understand something. And this whole idea is that you get that person to understand certain truths based on their own terms. There's this idea that I can't tell you what a truth is. You have to go through that journey and peel away at all the layers. So, I bring that up because I'm reading your books and I'm like, are children going to understand what's happening here? And realizing that this is the sort of thing that needs to be unpacked with a teacher or an adult, and how they're so many books out there that need that teacher to walk children through to understand what is happening here. My children read *The Jumbies*, and what they got from it is it's scary, oh my goodness, you know, and the other surface stuff. But, I would have to go back with them and say, this is what's happening. This is what's happening to culture. This is what's happening to tradition. What do you think about that as an educator as well?

TRACEY: Well, you know, I think because I am an educator, I think because I'm a teacher, I can't help but put that stuff in there. And, I know that the story's important, the surface story's important, because that is how you get the kid to read the book and to be excited about the book and get through the book. But, the other thing that I know is that a lot of time kids will reread things, and they will remember things. Years later, you will remember a thing and you will connect back to this thing that you read when you were a kid. So, I am providing the seeds for the kids now. And my hope is that at some point somebody will tease it out for them, or when they're older they can sauce it out for themselves. But, I have provided that groundwork, you know. So, I do think about that because I'm a teacher, and I think you do the same thing, as well.

IBI: Yeah, yeah.

TRACEY: I think you provide that groundwork knowing that somebody who is, you know, more educated or who has more information about what is inside of the book can sauce that out for a reader or a saddened reader who is like talk to me about Papa Legba. And then, a teacher or a parent or whomever, an elder, can say this is what that's about.

IBI: And I think the hope for both of us probably is to stay in print. Only because I've been writing for 20 years, and there is some books that I could take *American Street*, and say pair this book with that book. And there was one particular book that was published about 15 years ago and it's out of print now. And I was thinking... and I knew that I was not the first writer to do this thing that I'm trying to do in this book. There was a book called *Fresh Girl* by Jaira Placide from 15 years ago, and it's no longer... You know her? Yay, I shouted her out. And it's out of print for whatever reason, you know. Different, in terms of being... when we write a certain story and we're the only ones doing it, I think it can be lonely and it probably leaves room for that sort of thing. But, I would want somebody else to do this thing with either of our books, maybe ten years later and reach back and make those connections. And I was thinking your book connects to *Zahrah the Windseeker*, Nnedi Okorafor's *Zahrah the Windseeker*.

TRACEY: Oh, yeah.

IBI: And Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*.

TRACEY: Well, yeah. I'm like a giant fan.

IBI: Right.

TRACEY: Of Nalo.

IBI: And, you know, teachers, you know, would pick up... I'm realizing that people are reading this thinking it's an isolated thing like this is a new thing. But, there are people who've done this thing before, or tried to do, you know, tried to keep going, right.

TRACEY: I think... I think that's right. And I think, too, coming from the Caribbean, and I know, like growing up in Trinidad, you know, we had a lot of writers from the Caribbean were required reading, you know. I mean, I didn't move to The United States until I was 15 years old. [40:00] So, I had a good chunk of my education in Trinidad, where people like Claude McKay was required reading, where Michael Anthony was required reading, where... who is it who

wrote *Omeros*? I can't remember. Was it Derek Walcott? Well, Derek Walcott was required reading. He wrote *Omeros*, or maybe... but anyway. Somebody wrote *Omeros*. And anyway, you know, so for me I know that I was coming from a tradition that was already doing these things. They were already telling me stories. They were already... It was not a surprise to me, or it was not like a leap for me to write about brown people on an island because I grew up reading literature that's about brown people on an island. In addition to that, just being able to use your own language, because of course we all speak different languages throughout the Caribbean. But, being able to use the kind of English that we use in, within literature, was not a surprise, you know. We memorized these things. There's this one poem. It's called *Song of the Minute*. "Touris', white man, wiping his face, met me in Golden Grove Marketplace. He looked at m' ol' clothes brown wid stain. An' soaked right through wid de Portlan' rain, He cast his eyes, turn' up his nose, and said, "You're a beggar man, I suppose?" He said, "Boy, get some education. Be of some value to your nation." I said, "By God and did big right hand, you must recognize..." And that, I mean, this is like... this is an anthology that I had to read growing up. And it really is about banana man in Jamaica who is proud of who he is. And somebody coming in and casting judgment on him, and he has an immediate answer for it. He's like immediately, "No, you don't know what you're talking about. I know what I'm doing here, and I am contributing to my society." And so, I grew up with that. I grew up with this knowledge that what we had was not somehow lesser. And knowing also that, no, they're all at my back. You know, V.S. Naipaul, all these guys they are at my back. No women though. Wait, no I... no offense.

IBI: Same thing with Haiti, it's a long literary tradition. Three Musketeers, the author...

TRACEY: Um, I know Dumas.

IBI: Yeah.

TRACEY: Alexandre Dumas.

IBI: Haitian, born in my mother's town. Haitian. Haitian, African and French in that... Haitian in that way. Marie Chauvet wrote a trilogy, *Love, Anger, Madness*. A woman wrote, you know, she was a novelist. But, a lot of these women novelists and male novelists were exiled because they were writing during dictatorship. Edwidge Danticat and a course and she knows way more about the authors that we had. And we had poets like Frankétienne, and a lot of them are in Canada, as well, so we both come from very strong literary traditions. My husband's half Trinidadian, and he grew up in Trinidad. Yes, I mean, books and literature are a thing. Like, when my in-laws come, they just sit on the couch and pick any book out and start reading it from cover to cover, and just like kiss their teeth when they're done or have something to say and go on to the next one. Yeah, and I think that that's what makes us like not stand out. I don't want to make or pit us against, pan out. Because of the... I think, a colonial education mixed with a strong oral tradition.

TRACEY: It's a very interesting education. I have to say because you have all the British.

IBI: We have French.

TRACEY: You then you have all the native education, which is really interesting.

IBI: Catholic in Haiti is a strong Catholic colonial education on, in Haiti we say kimmel or the nuns. Like, you get educated by the nuns or the priests, and that with oral tradition.

TRACEY: That's why we like work so hard, you and I.

IBI: Probably, yeah.

TRACEY: Yeah, yes.

IBI: I even went to Catholic school here. So, that sort of like, the work ethic is very strong within us.

TRACEY: I think we're supposed to do questions.

IBI: Questions. I have three students here from my MFA program. I call them The Roses because all their middle names are Rose.

TRACEY: A bouquet!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, when I was in college, I hated the Greek mythology course I took sophomore year. But, I loved... I sort of fell in love with West African and South African literature junior and senior year. And I realized that they were both working with mythology, but it was a modern conversation. They were using their old mythology to sort of pull at some of the things that they were thinking about in modern culture. I guess, this word myth, right, it has truth, inheritance in it. And I'm curious. When you guys are... what kind of truths you guys are going to get at in your works with mythology, right, because I think they were trying to illuminate something with mythology.

IBI: I think with, for me, with Haitian or Haitian vodou mythology, there is an inherent truth in the deities themselves. And instead of, like, in *American Street*, instead of me saying something about crossroads and intersections and having to make decisions and the two divergent paths that one can take, I just say Papa Legba. And Papa Legba is what in Southern American lore is the devil at the crossroads, but we don't consider him a devil or, you know, mean spirited entity. He is an old man with a cane, and he's a trickster basically or a psychophant meaning he stands at the doorway between life and death or decision-making. So, to me it's symbolic language. I always have to have some sort of symbolic language because of that layer of truth there. Anyone can enter the book and have different meanings for different things. So, I think part of an African tradition, when I say African, I know it's a whole continent. But anywhere in the world, mythology's purpose is to add layers of truth to any and everything. And I think indigenous people have a symbolic language for everything, nothing is at face value. Everything has to mean something. So, to me that's why I have to have some meaning in the novel. Everything I write has some poetry in there. My next book has poetry. My middle grade has poetry and song. I know that in *The Jumbies*, your books, you have poetry and song in there. And I think that is our tradition. You tell a story and you have a chorus.

TRACEY: That's right.

IBI: You have a verse. You sing it to break up the density of like... I think for me, it makes up the density of the text, and it breaks up the density of the information a little bit. It gives the...

TRACEY: [inaudible] because even if you're sitting or you're describing something and it's a little bit heavy, it brings a little bit of joy too, you know, to that situation.

IBI: So, why do you add? What do you... What do you bring? What's it bring you?

TRACEY: I feel like I am very... I try to throw as much stuff into it a thing as I possibly can. I throw in references to things because I find them interesting or I find them amusing. And for me, it's all the truth, you know. It's all a part of getting at some larger idea. So, for... in the first one in *The Jumbies*, you know, there's this whole idea of, you know, there were people there, and then you came here, which is very much in need of story. And it's not really spelled out that this about, you know, Indigenous people versus people who came and took over a space. But, you can come to that if you think about it, you know. So, why leave it there for a reader to discover? You can see it or you cannot see it, and the story's still is okay. But, I think I, you know, use the situations more than the language. I use the situations of, or the relationships between people to suss out these things.

IBI: I forgot to mention something. In Haiti, In Haitian vodou the promiseland is guinea. There's a country named Guinea in West Africa. But, in Haitian folklore, guinea is the island beneath the sea. It's not yonder. It's not on another continent. The idea is that Africa or the homeland was so far away that they couldn't conjure or remember it in mythology. So, home is beneath the sea, and it's connected to the ships and the middle passage. Because, I think, the memory is that we had jumped shipped. There's some of them who had jumped ship, and that jumping ship was not fatal. It was not terminal. They must have gone to the other side, and that other side was guinea, which is the island beneath the sea. [50:00] And that's what *Rise of the Jumbies* reminded me of, you know. This idea...

TRACEY: Well, it's because...yeah. It's because Mama D'Leau, you know, she tries to rescue. So, then...

IBI: Right, so it's the same idea. We have Mama Wata, Mommie Wata.

TRACEY: Mommie Wata.

IBI: Mama D'Leau in West African, other traditions or Yoruba is Yemeya. And this idea that the ocean is a feminine entity that is protective of the children, I love that.

TRACEY: I try to connect Mama...I assumed that Mama D'Leau and Mommie Wata were probably the same person, but I don't make it clear whether or not that's actually true because I'm figuring that the stories were brought over and then it changed. But I don't know if that is accurate. There's no way to know if that's accurate.

IBI: It's the same basic idea that the ocean is a mother.

TRACEY: I know, but I don't say that they're the same. I'm like, maybe they are. It's another point to think about.

RENÉE: Can you talk about how you handled the emotional impact of your writing? You mentioned that it was so hard for you to write. We've talked about what it takes to write and push your own stuff to get what you have in the book. So can you talk a little bit about how you actually do that?

TRACEY: That's hard. I think I first came to you guys and complained and cried. Then I think just talking through it with you guys was helpful to me, because you feel like you're not...it's very isolating when you're actually sitting in front of the computer, sitting in front of the notebook, and you're writing a thing. Yes, you have community, but the actual work is, you're by yourself. There's nobody there, so it's hard sometimes to feel like somebody has their hands on your shoulder, I guess. I think when we get together like that, that's a very helpful thing for me, because then I can talk through something like that that's really hard. Then I can go back and do it. Then I just sort of muscle through it. It's the nuns again. The nuns are like, "Get this thing done!" And then I do it. "Where's my manuscript?"

IBI: For me, there's some...not "some", there's some violent scenes toward the end that was very, very hard. I had to ask my husband's a high school teacher. I had to ask him, "Can 16-year-old boys do this? Would this happen?" He's like...he comes home very often telling me—

TRACEY: Didn't he say it was worse?

IBI: Yeah.

TRACEY: Didn't he feel you had lightened it up too much?

IBI: Yeah, our children are going through a lot, a lot. And I don't think it really is represented in books too often, and talking about inner city black and brown kids. So I looked like a crazy person writing the last...I paced up and down the room, I'd bring myself to tears, I'd really get into the emotion, I acted it out. It just looks very weird. I really had to...

TRACEY: So you closed the doors...

IBI: Yeah, I really had to write with my body. What does it feel like to be dragged down the steps and having the carpet rub against your skin? What does it feel like to hold onto the bannister? Just a scene... You know what helped? That scene in *The Color Purple*. I watched movies too. But really getting to the heart of an emotion and trying to pinpoint every single thing.

TRACEY: Detail.

IBI: Yeah, you do that very well too. I saw everything. How in the world did you write a whole book underwater?

TRACEY: How indeed?

IBI: You know what I was thinking? She said it's underwater, and you're thinking about all the things that sound...the way things would...they're not walking, they're swimming to everything. I thought that was very impressive. But details. I'm a detailed person. You know how they say in

writing, showing but not telling? So showing. I have a sticky note next to my computer saying, “Don’t say what the emotion is.” This is for my students. “Don’t say what the emotion is. Describe what is happening to the body at every point and turn.” In traumatic scenes I have to really think about what’s happening to the body.

TRACEY: I do this with students as well, where I have them, especially with physical scenes, I have them get together and actually act it out so they can see how the body is working within something. I think this is really...I don’t do that. It’s all in my head. I don’t get up. I’m literally stationary, but I am someplace else entirely. I’m just sort of working it out as I do it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So you both talked a bit about educating youth and you have three kids, and you talked about how they’ve been—

IBI: She has two. We have five.

TRACEY: Five between us. Six if you count the dog. Nine if you count the turtles.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: —And being an educator. I was wondering if you both could give a piece of advice to your younger self with having all the experiences that you hold now. What would you tell yourself?

TRACEY: That’s a good question.

IBI: Depends on what age.

TRACEY: I know. 12-, 13-year-old self? 16?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Maybe how old your kids are.

IBI: How about your character?

TRACEY: Corinne is 11.

IBI: My character is 16 going on 17. What would you tell Corinne?

TRACEY: What would I say to 11-year-old Corinne or me? That’s hard to say. I think at 11 I really thought I was stupid. I really thought I was some kind of idiot. I would probably attend to that, because I became an academic person much later and did well at school later. In Trinidad growing up, where you rank in end-of-term placement is very high. It’s super crazy important. There’s this exam. It used to be called Common Entrance Exam, that you take at 11. It’s not called CEE. The results are printed in the newspaper with your name. So when you take the exam, months later, the exam results are printed in the newspaper: your name, your result, your rank, and what school you have qualified to get into. There’s a lot of pressure. I think I would probably have told myself not to worry so much and that I was not the idiot that I thought. I really, really thought I was stupid.

IBI: You weren’t top five.

TRACEY: No. Bottom five, often. Often bottom five.

IBI: And look at you now.

TRACEY: I struggled. I struggled a lot then. I became an academic sort of later. I think being an academic is a skill. It has nothing to do with intelligence. It has to do with how you know how to work school. I didn't know how to do that.

IBI: How to be a student.

TRACEY: I was busy thinking up stories, and I wasn't figuring out how to be a student. What would you tell your 16-year-old self?

IBI: For me, when I was 16, I went to a mostly all-white Catholic school in Queens, and there were about 20 Black kids out of a class of 700 for my grade, and half of those Black kids were Haitian. Haitians have a thing with Catholic high schools. I don't know. I really didn't fit in at all. I looked the part, but on the inside, I was just a black sheep. I just did not fit in with even other Black kids. I didn't know I was an artist. I looked down on the other artists in my school, the strange ones. Ninth, tenth, eleventh grade, I was not trying to be like that until I realized that I am that on the inside. I was trying so hard to fit in and I did not fit in. Now I see why. Look at me. So I think I would have told myself that you are a quirky, free spirit. I was basically a hippie and didn't know it. I would have just told myself—

TRACEY: And that's okay. That it's okay.

IBI: Right. That it's okay. I didn't see other ways...I really loved Freddy on *A Different World*. I didn't see anybody like that around me because there were so few...

TRACEY: You are totally Freddy. That is hilarious.

IBI: I loved...and I didn't know. If someone had shown me pictures of other people or introduced me to people who were alternative, listened to alternative music, dressed alternatively, wore their hair alternatively, I would have gotten the courage earlier on to do the thing that I needed to do.

TRACEY: At 16, she looked like she was in a TLC video.

IBI: I did.

TRACEY: True story.

IBI: But I was dying on the inside. Like, "I hate this hairstyle."

TRACEY: Exactly. *Don't go chasing waterfalls*...death on the inside.

IBI: We have time for one more question. Caroline, yes?

[1:00:31]

CAROLINE: So, two-part question: In your fiction, do you both feel that you are reinterpreting or retelling aspects of this oral tradition or written down these stories, or do you feel that you're trying to more put in writing the stories that you've grown up with or you ended up finding? The

second part of that is how have other people who are in these cultures reacted to your comments on...?

TRACEY: How have other people who are from the culture—

CAROLINE: Who are steeped in these story traditions...

TRACEY: How have they reacted to... So I have been told that I have gotten so many things wrong in these *Jumbies* books by my family. One of my uncles called up my mother and told her, “That’s not how lagahoos are supposed to behave.” Yeah, whatever. My feeling is that it’s not, for me, meant to be a direct retelling of these stories. Because these stories are an oral tradition, they feel very fluid to me, and they feel like whoever pins them down in a particular story, can pin them down however they want to pin them down. Another storyteller — and I hope that there is going to be another storyteller who will pin down exactly these same characters in another way. I think that that’s okay. I think that’s all part of what it is...it sort of maintains the idea that it is an oral tradition because every storyteller will tell the story a little bit differently, their little spice, their little flavor on it. I feel like it maintains that spirit by not worrying about what the rest of it is, but also just because I was doing so much research and there just was such a wide variety of things that they could possibly be. There was no way to have one true jumbie retelling of any of these particular jumbies. So yes, I know that people have read these stories and have had some thoughts about these stories. I don’t care about their thoughts.

IBI: For me, nobody had told me to my face.

TRACEY: You need to come to my house.

IBI: But it’s not a true retelling. I’m using elements, the deity-figures and putting it into a contemporary story, but there are so many Haitians who look down on Haitian vodou, and if they are practitioners, they would probably not approve of my making Papa Legba into an old man on a corner in Detroit. That’s just not how it works. So I know they would not approve, because it’s not just a mythology, it’s part of a tradition. Some people call it religion.

TRACEY: Religion, right.

IBI: So they would have...my character who sees this old man as Papa Legba, that probably would not happen for a traditional practitioner. She’s not going to go up and be like, “Papa Legba.” The idea is that you summon down Papa Legba in a ritual or a ceremony. That is for story’s sake. We do things for story’s sake, and we’re not documenting. It’s not nonfiction.

TRACEY: But I also think with Papa Legba and with this particular story, *An American Street*, is that there is a little bit of element of, is this actually happening or is it her fantasy? And I think that too is something where...let’s say somebody tried to nail you down for that. You could go there and say, “Well, actually... Well, actually it’s not actually happening.” You know what I mean? I think there are a lot of ways to circumvent people trying to really be sticklers. But yeah, we’re not anthologizing. We’re not doing nonfiction even though that’s a thing that we’ve thought about, trying to nail down those stories. But how? It’s not possible.

IBI: Let’s squeeze in one last question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: ...Tracey's book and I find it really interesting that your uncle would say, "This is not how this is." But there are children who, they recognize those jumbies. You don't necessarily explain it, but they understand that, and so I think people (a) underestimate children, and they forget that as adults we like to classify, categorize.

TRACEY This particular uncle is very—

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Some people are very open to, "Oh, I recognize that..."

TRACEY: This particular uncle is very, "This is how it is." He's just that guy. If somebody was going to complain about it, it was going to be him.

IBI: All right. I think we're closing. You want to high five?

[01:06:04]