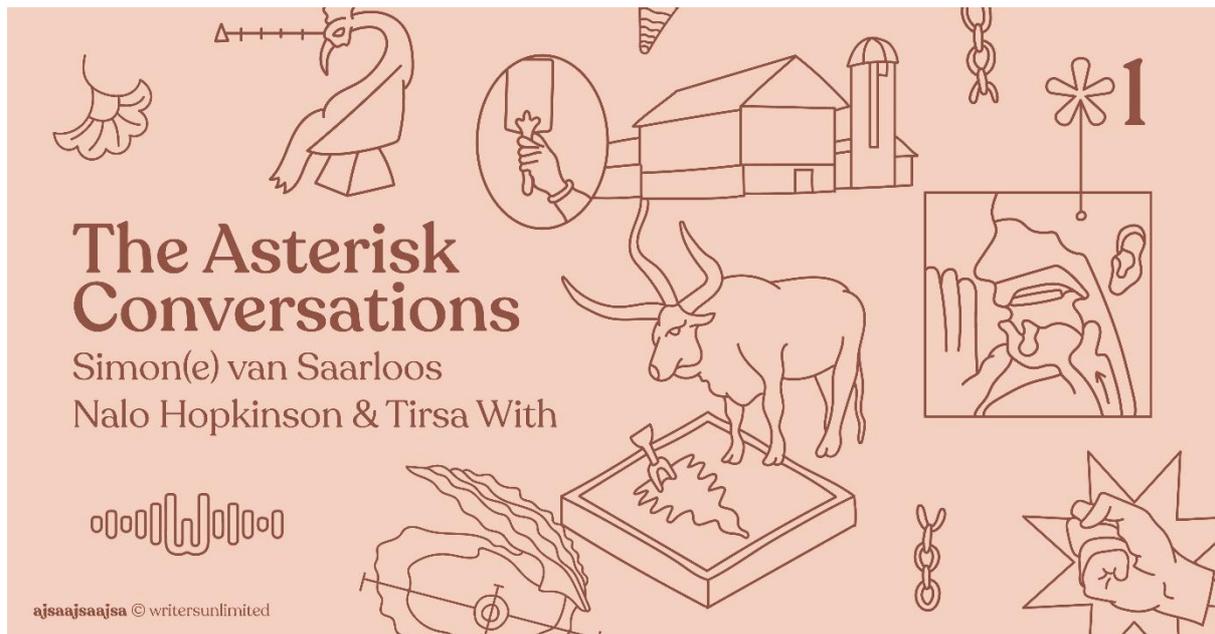


Simon(e) van Saarloos I wanted, actually, to start us off with getting into our bodies. And now that it took us a while to get here, maybe that's even better to get that stress out. So, I just wanted to propose, like, let's take 20, 30 seconds to just sit with our bodies. Even though we see each other. But if you wanted to propose something else...?

Nalo Hopkinson No, sitting, breathing, is good.

[Sound of inhalation and exhalation].



Introduction by Simon(e) van Saarloos

Hi, this Simone. Or Simon. And I am joined and so very excited to be joined by sci-fi writer Nalo Hopkinson. You know Nalo from the short stories that she published in the many collections that came out or her novels or the graphic novel that she recently worked on.

I first met Nalo Hopkinson in the summer of 2019 at a writing workshop in The Netherlands. And she came to The Netherlands with her partner David all the way from California. And we did bodypainting, we had nights in the backyard of the hotel where we were staying full of conversation. But ofcourse Nalo also gave a writing workshop which she called 'Feeding the Hungry Ghosts'. Now, ghosts are the spirits of deceased people, and there are many different ways of how spirits or ghosts work depending on the culture and the narratives that you're surrounded by. But something that is quite common to ghosts is that if you want them to speak to you, you have to feed them. What ghosts miss is sensation and embodiment. Now, Nalo argues, that the reader will live in your story but they do this through their head, through reading, they are in their own head experiencing your story in an embodied way or they want to be fed in an embodied way. So, with feeding the hungry

ghosts, Nalo reminds the writer to think about the body, to think about sensations and letting the story be a sensation.

I hope that for you, listening to this conversation, will also give you a sensorial experience.

Anyway, I had a lot of fun talking to Nalo Hopkinson again, it was also great to see her again.

And if you hear us talking about Delany or Octavia, we are talking about the legendary sci-fi writers Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler. Since Nalo knows or has known both writers, saying knows and has known because Octavia Butler unfortunately has passed, and Samuel R. Delany has been her mentor and is luckily still alive.

These sci-fi writers are known for the way that they write about queer sexuality, the way they write sci-fi from racialized subjects and these are of course aspects you will see you will recognize, as Nalo is part of this lineage and legacy. Enjoy!

Simon(e) van Saarloos So, I've actually been thinking about you a lot during the Covid-19 pandemic. Because I remember your experience reading sci-fi or any sort of fiction that involves the apocalypse, there would always be the question, where are the disabled folk? Where are the black people? And I've been wondering how you have been living through this pandemic and whether you feel that, with the current moment, on one hand, you see, of course, disabled people are at the front of some of the voices that we hear and at the same time also not at all. Same with black people and Black Lives Matter movement. This interesting or painful tension, maybe.

Nalo Hopkinson Yes, quite, quite painful. One or two places quite hopeful, because in the middle of the despair and the worry for people on the front lines of the protesting, I remember reading that this is one of the largest civil rights actions the world has seen, which is not something I thought I would see in my lifetime. That people would be putting their bodies on the line alongside black people. So, there's that. But there's also this moment of... There's a couple of things, and one is reading apocalyptic fiction, particularly if you think in terms of Aboriginal peoples, in terms of African descended peoples. You hear people talking about the apocalypse, and you want to say, well, which apocalypse? Because for us, that started a few centuries ago. We're living in it right now. But then on top of it, add, you know, a pandemic and the current murders at the hands of police and those are ongoing, those have not stopped and have been going on forever in the US and in Canada. So, there's this one long wail in my mind of. haven't you been listening to us? And us is environmentalists, environmental scientists, science fiction writers, people who actually do some of this research at one level or another who have known that this kind of thing was coming down the pipe. This anger that our government is not listening to us. And I live in a country that feels like there has been a dedicated program since at least the early 20th century to

de-educate America. And so, you have people believing and saying things like, you know, China grew this in a lab somewhere, people throwing acid on Chinese looking people, yelling 'Go back home!' So, we took a moment and took one class and we just talked about that and the protests and their feeling - many of them - that they weren't doing enough. And also reminding some of them, 'When you were graduating, and I was hearing, "Oh, I don't feel like I can celebrate"', reminding them, that's what we're fighting for - anybody - their right to celebrate. So, they should damn well acknowledge that they made it through these four years and then they're doing so in a really painful time and they should celebrate. So that's what that's been like. And trying to write in the middle of it has been... Interesting.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Have you felt like, have you found a way to celebrate? Because I'm also thinking, for example, right now, Pride going on in the Netherlands or in Europe and trying to find ways to come together, but also trying to find ways not to come together, to protect health, right? This is such a weird...

Nalo Hopkinson Yeah, yeah. Weird, weird times. So, Toronto Pride, which is where I would usually find myself over the summer, got canceled. That's a lot of community and living in an isolated... If you're from Toronto, the Riverside seems like a small town. So, we couldn't... Toronto Pride is not happening. Toronto Caribana. There's an annual Caribbean festival that is like the Toronto version of Carnival, so it's a little tiny carnival. It's not happening. And if you do any kind of non-monogamous or poly, but your sweeties are elsewhere, that's that loss of connection as well. It's been bad. On the other hand, I have a stable job with tenure; I have a much better income than I ever thought it would. I was able to, you know, get the apartment supplied with food and necessities. I'm not doing... Neither one of us has, we're not, we're not having the kinds of difficulties that a lot of people all around us are.

Simon(e) van Saarloos And I'm reminded of a conversation that Toshi Reagon had, that - you know, Toshi Reagon - and she was talking, they were talking about The Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler and how it wasn't inspiration, actually, for Toshi to prepare for the apocalypse until she really talked about having maps at home and having off-line communication strategies. Do you ever look at fiction like that, or apocalyptic fiction, in a sense that it prepares you for a moment like this?

Nalo Hopkinson I wish I didn't have to. And Octavia was from down the street in Pasadena, which is very close to here. And in fact, the last public event I attended before lockdown was Toshi's folk opera Parable of the Sower at UC Los Angeles [UCLA]. Yes and no. I mean, it's not a definite memory because my memory is bad, but I sort of think I heard Octavia once say that if it's things that happen in her novels [that] come to pass, people haven't been

listening. I would read her work and get very scared and very depressed at first. And then I'd re-read it and find the hope in it. So, I don't have anything as well thought out as maps, but we've been talking about stuff like that in this household and we have some plans. Sheesh, I guess, in some ways, fiction is a roadmap for how to deal with bits of life you haven't experienced or to get some confirmation for bits of life you have. So, yes. I just wish it didn't have to be that novel. I mean, literally reliving along the route that, that...

Simon(e) van Saarloos In California.

Nalo Hopkinson ...That Lauren would have taken, yes, in the first Parable book, yeah.

Simon(e) van Saarloos So in a way, we should be glad that she didn't finish the third novel, if it's like a future vision, right?

Nalo Hopkinson Well, in her third novel she planned it to take them into space, and take them off-world, take them to another planet, so maybe that would have been nice.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Would that have been of your liking?

Nalo Hopkinson I don't know, because I kind of feel wherever you go, there you are. So, we... Unless we fix, learn to fix, what we're doing here, we'll just export the problems along with this and try to destroy another world. And so, one of the things I remember talking to my students about is like, well, you might feel like this thing that you're studying right now in the [creative writing's science fiction] is lightweight, but it is one of the ways that we actually get to talk about survival, really. And to talk about what it's like being in the space. We learn empathy through fiction. Art in this part of the world [where art is considered a thrill], is the thing that gives you a way to look forwards, or to look to one side or the other and see each other.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Well, when you say forwards, it also reminds me of looking at time. On the one hand, of course, thinking about Ti-Jeanne, if I say it correctly...

Nalo Hopkinson You do.

Simon(e) van Saarloos ...from your first novel, *Brown Girl in the Ring* like this, this overlap of time, like having a gift, having second sight. So, like one time, future time, merging with a current time and also thinking about something that you described when we met each other at Camp Cushy, Eindhoven when you came to teach a workshop. You talked about the image of 'sancova'.

Nalo Hopkinson 'Go back and get it'.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Exactly. And the more circular kind of time. And I'm sort of bringing in this together with something that you said at the beginning, when you said, well, I mean, this is not the apocalypse, right? Like, we've seen this before. For many people in many positions, we've seen this before.

Nalo Hopkinson When you talk in terms of time and Ti-Jeanne being able to be in one time then another, she's also experiencing liminal time. She's experiencing that time and place that is of the imagination. And [...] and of non-consensual reality.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Say [more] about that 'non-consensual'.

Nalo Hopkinson Non-consensual. Well, it's because it's different for everyone. And so, in the genre fiction world, we're supposed to divide science fiction and fantasy very neatly, where science fiction is about technology in the future and fantasy is about belief systems and folklore and magic and that kind of stuff. But I see them as being part of a continuum or at least they're very implicated in each other. Both talk about the problem of labor, and science fiction tries to solve it with technology, fantasy tries to solve it with magical older technologies. But we never really solve the problem of the fact that life is hard work and we devolve that hard work to people we don't pay enough to do it. And science fiction tries to make robots do it, but once the robot is complicated enough to actually look after a human being, it's pretty much a being itself. Fantasy tries to do so with magic, but the same thing happens. If you think about the Sorcerer's Apprentice and what happens when that magic goes awry because the sorcerer hasn't bothered to... He's been keeping secrets from his apprentice. And of course, it goes awry. This apprentice is just trying to find a way to not be so tired at the end of the day. He has committed no crime. So, what was I saying? Time and the idea that fantasy is unreal. People who criticize fantasy say that it's because there are no rules. Well, there's always an internal logic to a strongly written piece of fantasy. So, there are rules, but they are going to be different for each piece. And when you talk about liminal time, liminal space, you don't know what you're going to find in there. You don't know if the laws of physics are going to work. You don't know if, you know, if all of a sudden [...] will be speaking. You have no idea. So, it's the reality that we cannot agree upon, but that nevertheless is real. [...]

Simon(e) van Saarloos Have you read *Becoming Human* by Zakiyyah Jackson?

Nalo Hopkinson Oh, I'm about to buy it. Payday's this weekend. I'm about to buy it, literally.

Simon(e) van Saarloos You should get it. You're in it.

Nalo Hopkinson I know.

Simon(e) van Saarloos They should send it to you.

Well, I can support them.

The reason that I mention it, besides just to flatter you, is that there's a chapter on your work in there. It's called The Sense of Things which immediately speaks of this liminal time or this non-consensual reality. And it draws, actually, from sort of what we would call the hard sciences, right? Like the laws of physics, the mathematics. And it takes away the sort of objective route and a deep societal trust that we have in that kind of knowing and knowledge which immediately relates to what you're talking about right now with liminal time. How does that work for you? Is that something that is consciously present in writing?

Nalo Hopkinson Eventually, I think, if I'm working on a piece long enough, I'll start to realize that that's sort of what's going on. At one point a few years ago, it seemed to me that almost everything I undertook, at some level, ended up tackling time, which is a mess. Time is fine, but we have linear brains. Time is not linear, really. Time, and space.

Simon(e) van Saarloos I'm with you.

Nalo Hopkinson The physics of time and space. This is like it's like magic in itself. And here I am, the person who failed sciences, tackling, writing about, time. So, it's not conscious, but it was the thing that helped me to realize that [closed fiction] is a time-based art as much as any media, that we play with time in our stories.

Simon(e) van Saarloos And do you feel that when we have this linear time, there is... We've already mentioned the 'sancova'. If I say it correctly, I think you should say it.

Nalo Hopkinson 'Sancofa', I think. It's not even a word in a language I speak, but we say 'Sankofa' over here. And it's an Adinkra symbol, much like this one.

Simon(e) van Saarloos You're showing your tattoo.

Nalo Hopkinson Yes, it's a very abstract image of a bird looking back over its shoulder. And it's holding an egg, which presumably, it has just picked up. And the idea is that you have to take the past with you as you go into the present of the future, otherwise things are going to go wrong. So, it's 'go back and get it'. Go back and get the thing that you have left. Take all of you along with you. And that keeps coming up, too. I forget who it was who said, 'Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it'. That idea is not new [...] work in science, or any one culture.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Can you say how you do it in terms of, if having such... Embodying hybridity yourself, which, of course, is every human being, etc, etc. But it's very poignant in your work, or at least, it's legible in your work. And I'm wondering also when you're teaching, maybe these things come up, but how multi-conscious can you be about your own backgrounds, about your own narratives that you carry within you?

Nalo Hopkinson When I put fingers to keyboard to start a story, I have to decide, even if I'm working with characters who are Anglophone, I have to decide what kind of image they're speaking. How can other writers say they never have to think about it? I mean, how could you not think about it? But then, of course, I'm from the Caribbean. I've lived in three different countries in the Caribbean, I've lived in Canada, I lived in the US. I'm aware of registers of speech that happened loosely along class background. I have to decide what race or races my characters are. I have to decide what their gender expression is, what their sexuality is. That helps me figure out who they are, what their communities are, how they speak, how they embody... It can actually stop you sometimes, because you're like, 'Wait! I don't know... What? I don't know. How this person talks. I don't know how they would say, blahblahblah,' but I don't know how you don't do that. I mean, I can see if you come from a fairly monolithic background, there's still all kinds of diversity in that you can write in without ever having to think about how your characters speak or what they look like. You still kind of sort of need to think about their gender and their sexuality, I would think, but some people don't.

Simon(e) van Saarloos I mean, if you never experience it as a sexuality because you're heterosexual, then, yeah.

Nalo Hopkinson Yeah, yeah. Does It never occur to you that you've even left out a whole chunk of the population and 'I'm from there'. So, yes, it is conscious, mostly, and they do sometimes mess up; my own biases show. Hopefully, while they're still in draft. I can go back in and do some work there.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Do you check that somehow?

Nalo Hopkinson I guess so. I think of who's.... I kind of sort of, very loosely, it's not like I have a checklist, think of who's not in the story and whether that's valid and how I want it to be. I think of how I've represented the voices and the experiences that are more marginalized in the world. I once wrote a whole novel and turned it into my editor before I realized that I had filled a Caribbean nation with magical Negroes. Of all the people to go and do that! I know my editor is not going to catch it, so... But I had time to rewrite, thank God. And that was partly my own last, class biases, I think, showing where I had romanticized working class and farming class people in that context. So, it happens.

Simon(e) van Saarloos When you say romanticized, it brings me back to something else. When you said it can even stop you. And I think that those are the two markers, maybe, that people use as an excuse to refrain from having more, quote unquote, 'complex characters', where they would be like, 'Well, if I have to think about it, it will stop me'. And the other thing is that this idea of fiction being a romanticization and having a sort of an entitlement to romanticization, right? Which is also how the novel came up and...

Nalo Hopkinson Yes, yes, yes...

Simon(e) van Saarloos Yeah, so tell us.

Nalo Hopkinson Well, like, you're making art, everything stops you. It is... I mean, doesn't it? It is something you can decide what you want to do, but make a decision. You don't just default. And we also hear, 'Oh, but I can't represent that experience. I've never had that experience. That's an experience that's way more marginalized than mine' And I honor that understanding. And yet, make a conscious decision about whether or not you're going to wrestle with it from story to story rather than just a blanket. Right now, the novel I've been trying to finish for over a decade is set in a Caribbean past that never existed. So, I created a whole new... The power balance is very different than it was. The history is a little bit different. So, having to create how people speak. And some of that, I'm just pulling from random stuff I know. I think, too, part of what we're talking about is world building, is that rather than saying, 'No, this is 19th century whenever and this is what people wear', it's embodied in the language of the piece. I have, when I was writing... Then you start forgetting the names of your own novels - the Salt Roads - because that wasn't my title for it. But who's writing The Salt Roads? A lot of my characters were sex workers, and it was set in 4th century Alexandria in Egypt, 18th and 19th century France, mostly Paris. I needed to know how they would speak. And they say that science fiction/fantasy are always written in translation because you're translating a world that doesn't exist to us. So, I needed to figure out how to try to represent the speech of 4th century Alexandrian sex workers. But I'm doing it

into 21st century English. I found this great lexicon called the Big Book of Filth. It's actually not such a big book, but it's chock full of all kinds of dirty words and phrases in English, and their etymologies, when and where they came from. And so, I had to try and imagine how to make them sound like this is their job. So, they have a specialized language and it's not fussy language, it's language that gets to the point. How do I say that in English? Not speak in any kind of Egyptian, much less any kind of Alexandrian ancient Egypt Egyptian. And one of the things I remember looking up was metaphors for beauty. How did they think about beauty, particularly female beauty? One of the things I found was that they would compare people to, women to, an ox, which sounds really not right from our perspective, but it's because oxen have these beautiful eyes that looked like they were already wearing, you know, liner, and because Hera, the goddess Hera, is sometimes represented as an ox. So, like, okay, I can't in my modern-day English call a woman a cow and have people understand that it's being viewed as beautiful. So instead, I ended up saying 'as oxen-eyed as Hera'. Well, ox is a male cow. Well, whatever. But I tried to convey the sensibility.

Simon(e) van Saarloos How do you do research in oral histories? Because this one was a book, actually, but many of these... I mean, it also reminds me of queer vocabularies that are being billed, right? That have not been written down exactly, because they need to escape the gaze of power.

Nalo Hopkinson And because their power isn't necessarily there to put in books. I'm a little chicken to do direct research, so I'll look for books and articles first. But I will also look at people who are formal or informal experts who are willing to talk to me. So, for the Egypt part of *The Salt Roads* I approached a curator at the Royal Ontario Museum who specialized in Egypt, and we went out to lunch. And she was queer and quite happy to talk to me about sex and sexuality and sex workers. So, I found out a lot of stuff that I wouldn't have otherwise. Or just going... Putting it out there. So, there's two pages, four pages, of one issue of the *House of Whispers*, because it came out as a monthly and then it's being collected into graphic novels. It was set in Japan, and not just Japan, but one of the islands off the coast of Japan that has the tradition of women pearl divers. So, I looked up some of that history, but then I needed words and phrases in Japanese that were correct as much as possible. So, I approached a Japanese writer I know who's a good friend, and she said, 'Well, no, I actually don't speak enough Japanese to do that, but I know somebody who does,' and she [...] It's cool when you say you're writing a novel. All of a sudden, people really want to help you. So, they have knowledge that you need. They're very, very generous.

Simon(e) van Saarloos I have a few questions in terms of writing or, like, how it affects writing. And you mentioned a little bit, like, having, for example, a

polyamorous lifestyle, having sweeties. I was going to say all over, but I don't want to make it...

Nalo Hopkinson Oh, no. I'm getting tired, but the possibility is there.

Simon(e) van Saarloos That's, you know... And also, I mean, I can ask the simple question about embodiment... Well, I'm not sure if it's a simple one... But I can ask a question about embodiment and sexuality, being in your writing and thinking about Delaney having sexuality in his writing and you talking about that. You're making a little sign to your heart. But maybe I can draw the question in with also a polyamorous lifestyle or living a polyamorous life and how this, if this, affects your writing.

Nalo Hopkinson At this stage, I'm largely poly without portfolio. So, I guess that it's more in the possibility than in the actuality. But it does affect my writing because... Again, when I'm thinking along those axes of what my characters do, I can't assume they're straight, and I can't just assume their monogamous. What happens if I don't assume that? What happens if I have all the possibilities that I can think of to draw on, and how do I write it? Do I write it as though I'm introducing it to a population that isn't familiar [with it] or [...] is, or do I do try to do a mix of both? One of the delights of writing *House of Whispers* was that the main character, the deity Erzulie, in some traditions of the religion, has three husbands. So, I had fun with that! Completely normalized it. She has three husbands. They love each other. I decided they weren't... That the men probably weren't sexually involved with each other, but they're very intimate with each other. They love and they care for each other, just as they love and they care for her. It's just what they do. And I had to come up with terms that they would use to talk about each other because they're married. So, I think, sometimes, I said 'co-husbands'. I think, sometimes, I said 'husband-in-law'. And the joy of being able to put that on the page, have the artists and the editors run with it and then watch the readers either recognize what I'm doing or be caught by what I'm doing and have to think about it. That was so much fun. When I first started writing and being published, for one thing, I was straight identified. So, there's a whole coming out process that had to happen, both for me and how I represented my work on the page. And I come from a Caribbean family that's fairly conservative. So, I had to find a way to do that separation that allowed me to put the work on the page. And found more support within my extended family than I thought I would. But I remember that terror. And even when I straight identified, wanted to have great characters and wanted to have funny characters. And wanted them to be black and Caribbean, which at that point was transgressive as hell. And being really, really, really scared. But every so often at a reading, someone would come up to me and say, 'I read this part. [then whispers:] That's me too. [Louder:] Oh, thank you. thank you, thank you, thank you'.

Simon(e) van Saarloos So nice. And I mean, it also makes me think about when you're saying [it would be difficult at the beginning], whether it's also about having the expectation of a singular narrative as opposed to having this abundance of meaning. One person can hold many different religions even, maybe, together. Different languages, different husbands.

Nalo Hopkinson Yeah, yeah. And I think part of it is when you're representing, particularly the... No, not particularly your own community, but when you're representing a community that is already marginalized and dealing with multiple axes of bias and efforts to pretty much kill us, really. The world tends to see us as one thing. So, I tend to get seen as black first. I'm okay with that. But you have got to know that black means everything I am. I'm very okay with that. But it speaks broader, so I think sometimes it's how we expect to be represented. But also, how we, almost self-protectively sometimes think of ourselves. There's this sort of idea that you have to perform respectability and people [will] give it to you - they don't. They don't care. I remember arguments that would happen over Toronto Pride, where the more outré elements of society... Where people were saying, 'Well, you can't have them on the parade, because, no, then the streets won't respect us'. The ones that respect you, respect you; the ones that don't, don't. They are not going to do so in a hurry. So, you might as well have the naked people parading down the street. Please. Please have the naked people parading down the street. And the guys in chaps and the women with whips, like, please don't cut off part of the community in an effort to appeal to a main stream.

Simon(e) van Saarloos But the contextuality of that is so poignant. I mean, just thinking about being naked in Pride. In the Netherlands, being naked is not the problem. The problem is, if you're not rich and white or you don't pose on a boat that is represented by the institution or the company that you work for, which buys a spot in the parade.

Nalo Hopkinson Well, we started to get that second part too, where Toronto Dominion Bank has a float. At least you get to see who, at your bank, is queer. But the police had a float. And two years ago, Black Lives Matter staged a protest at the parade and sort of browbeat the people who run Pride into cancelling the police float. And they tried to walk that back and say they had been forced into doing it. Yes, because it was [never] going to happen, of course. They had been forced into it. It's funny writing across different expectations [...] being rich and white. I remember being there on the sidelines for that particular Black Lives Matter protest and afterwards hearing two white men saying, 'Well, I don't know what their problem is. The police have been very good to gays in Toronto', and I'm like, 'You just heard two hundred people tell you they have not. But what you mean is that they've been good to white people'. I recently had somebody ask whether I was interested in

writing a particular character in a particular world, let's say. And this character is one that hasn't been featured often and who is black. And the editors said, I thought you could do some kind of Afro-futurist thing where they lead an army of special forces across the world and I'm like, 'So Afro-futurism isn't about trying to get away from all that's military?' So, could I do it some other way? And to the editor's credit, the response was: 'Yes, of course. I don't have a good understanding of that nuance, so I will take your note and you tell me what you want to write'. But that was a moment that I had to walk around the block and take a few deep breaths because [you're] talking about my life, and the life of people close to me. And to you, it might mean Black Panther. And yes, it does, but that's reflecting something actually happening in the world.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Which leads me to my final question. I guess it's a futuristic question. If we end the world as we know it, the ways that we currently understand the world, what would you wish that we would have left behind, or that we would have had left or that we would have unlearned?

Nalo Hopkinson An automatic fear and hatred of the other. The idea of geographical boundaries. Some of the talk around Covid-19. People have seemed to have been assuming that they can keep it out at the border. So, like, you know: 'You realize it's airborne? And one world, same air'. So that the idea of geographical boundaries, the assumption that the past was stupid, that people were less sophisticated and less able to ask questions and think incisively. Poverty. Hunger. There's no reason for either of those things to exist in this world. We can end them in a month. If the will is there; the will is not there. Yeah, of course, it would be a good start.

Simon(e) van Saarloos Yeah, it would be a great fucking start. Thank you so much.

Nalo Hopkinson You're welcome.

Simon(e) van Saarloos

Thank you so much for listening to this conversation with Nalo Hopkinson. So each time I have a conversation with an international author, we also invite a maker in The Netherlands to respond to the conversation. And this time it was very obvious that we should invite Tirsia With to respond. Tirsia With is an audio-storyteller, and she builds on the traditions of her Maroon Surinamese heritage which taught her the importance of multiplicity of voice and the way audio creates space for this.

Tirsia With also met Nalo Hopkinson when Nalo was in The Netherlands in the summer of 2019. Tirsia has decided to respond with her story on the questions that Nalo and I share on non-linear time.

Tirsa With

During recess, Ayo sits in the sandbox. It's his first week at Sandbury Middle School, and the enormous campus that is shared with a kindergarten, primary and high school overwhelms him. All around the playground, kids are running, screaming and playing. Most of his new classmates hang around benches and swings. The square sandbox is deserted, most kids his age don't play in the sand anymore. Only his muddy shoes look at home in the little dunes. Ayo huddles forward to continue drawing people in the sand. There's a man with a hat, a person with a dress and a little girl with curly pigtails.

"Is that supposed to be Nia?" a redhaired boy asks. He suddenly appeared behind Ayo, pointing at the sand drawing. Ayo doesn't respond, but tries to turn his back towards the boy. Ayo remember seeing him in his class, and tries to recall his name: Charles? "Don't you think it's a little early for crushes, or are you a womanizah?" he continues, with a mocking African accent. "It's nobody", Ayo said, and he starts drawing another figure with a big round head.

"Oh I agree that Nia's a nobody, but come on, don't you think that one looks more like her anyway?" He says as he puts his foot on Ayo's latest drawing.

"Just leave me alone," Ayo says. He stands up and turns around, and as he swing his arm his hand accidentally smacks on Charles' shoulder.

"Oh you're trying to fight now? I'll show you how we fight round here". Charles pulls back his arm to prepare for a punch. When he extends his arm, Ayo flinches, but doesn't feel anything. Nia stands between Ayo and Charles and grabbed his fist. Before Charles can realize what's happening, she yanks his arm down, pulls it back and presses his fist up behind his back.

"Au! What are you doing," Charles cries out.

"I wanted to ask you just that," Nia answers, then pushes his arm up a little higher.

"Let me go, Nia!" Charles squeaks, failing to hide his pain. "Alright." Nia pushes Charles forward. He stumbles, but doesn't fall.

"Next time I'll –"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, see ya Charlie!" Nia says with a big smile on her face, as she waved him goodbye. Charles shakes his head and walks away.

When Nia looks back at Ayo, Ayo doesn't manage to conceal his staring. She smiles awkwardly and raises her eyebrows. Ayo doesn't say anything at first. He's not sure whether to be grateful, or embarrassed.

"Thanks," he whispers under his breath. "How did you...?" He paused. "I didn't even know you could hear us."

"Well, I guess it's easy to hear your own name" Nia answers quickly, trying to brush the issue off. Ayo looks down. His gaze wanders off and rests on the swings, behind the carrousel, where Nia sat earlier reading a book.

Something doesn't quite add up. Nia looks at the swings too, lost in thought.

"You're quick," Ayo concludes.

"I.. I guess so." she agrees. Nia turns to Ayo, nods, and walks towards her book that still lay on the ground next to the swing. Ayo looks at his classmate,

more carefully than he had before. Of course he'd tried to draw her, but since he didn't want to be caught staring, he hadn't gotten much more detailed than her pigtails, that sit atop her head like round sponges. Now he sees that Nia is quite tall, and rather skinny. She wears square black glasses and a denim jacket over a yellow T-shirt. As she kneels down to pick up the book, the leg of her jeans lift a little, revealing her ashy ankles.

#

Inside, Nia walks straight to the library. She rushes down a random isle and sits down on the floor, her knees tucked in and her arms hugging around them. Nia buries her face into her legs. What just happened?

When Nia sat on the swing, she thought she heard her name amidst the yelling children's voices. She looked around and saw Charles standing over Ayo in the sandbox.

"Nia is a nobody," she heard Charles say. Nia jumped off the swing and started walking towards the sandbox. She'd had it with Charles. Was he such a coward that he would spread rumors about her to the new kid? When she was a few feet away, she saw Ayo swing his arm into Charles's shoulder. Nia hadn't realized she had been holding her breath all this time. Even though her anger management counsellor told her to breathe "slow but deliberate" breaths, holding it just felt better. She had tried to explaining to Mr Jones, that it made her feel more calm, that it allowing her to pause and take a little break from it all – he wouldn't buy it.

As she approached Charles, she felt her surroundings become more sluggish. Around her, the screaming noises started to fade. Nia felt as if she were underwater. On the carrousel two children with a look of excitement on their face; but the carrousel wasn't spinning. She saw children with both legs suspended in the air, fixed in place. Others had their mouths wide open, but no sound came out. She blinked and realized everything was still. Nobody moved. Nobody made a sound. In front of her she saw Charles, his arm was pulled back, ready for a punch. In shock, Nia inhaled sharply, moved towards Charles and intercepted his arm.

But how had she been so... quick, Nia wonders now, leaning her head on the rows of books behind her. She doesn't consider herself quick, she's always been bad at silly reaction time games where a teacher would drop a ruler and she'd have to clap to catch it. Neither is she a particularly good runner, especially not in the middle of recess, with kids running around playing tag. Nia wasn't quick. It was something else. It had to be. Nia sighs and extends her legs onto the floor.

"Excuse me," Mrs. Williams, the librarian, asks in a hushed voice. "Shouldn't you be in class?" The short, chubby woman with a chart full of books approaches Nia. When she sees the girl's startled face, the librarian's expression softens. She bends forward and puts her hands on the Nia's shoulders. "Is everything alright, dear?"

“Ehh yes, yes,” Nia whispers as she picks up her book. “I’m sorry Ma’am, I lost track of time”, Nia says and gets up. She nods apologetically and rushes out of the library.

After spending the afternoon at the pool with Ayo and his brother Samuel, Nia is the first to be done changing. She rushes outside to continue reading her book. It's a fantasy novel and she finally got her hands on the last part of the trilogy. Sitting on the bench, hunched over the pages, water drips from her hair onto the paper. Nia can't even be bothered that it's a library book. The story got really intense and she eagerly flips through the pages. After a while, Ayo and Alex join her outside.

"Do you want a ride home from our mom?" Ayo asked.

"No thanks," Nia answers without looking up.

"Are you... sure?" Ayo asked as he sits down next to her on the bench. "Our mom wouldn't mind. Right Samu?" Samuel nods. He stands by the road looking to see if the car has arrived yet.

"Nah really, I'm good," Nia repeats. "I came by bike"

"Oh really, y'all bike around here?" Ayo asks.

"I do," Nia says as she flips the page. Ayo nods and a car pulls up.

"Well, there's our ride," he says as he jumps up. "See you tomorrow, Nia."

"See ya" Nia says, and she briefly looks up. She waves as Ayo gets into the front seat of the car, next to a blonde, middle aged woman. After reading for a couple more minutes, Nia gets up and walks to her bike like a zombie, her eyes still fixed on the pages. She unlocks the black bike she got from her father when she turned twelve, he called it a "granny bike". Nia never figured out why. When she gets on the bike, she places her book in front of her, resting against the crate that hangs in front of her handle bars. She slowly rides away, paced not quicker than a pedestrian. From time to time, her gaze shoots up, scans the environment and moves back to the letters on the pages. Traffic is quiet, as it usually was when she approached her part of town, so Nia becomes more concerned with the action in her book.

Hooooonk

Nia almost drops her book when she heard the loud noise. She looks around to see where it had come from. A voice shouted from a car to her right. The car is only inches away. She squeezes her breaks and her eyes.

It's like she's the pool. Underwater and safe. Floating in a little ball, no need to move, breathe or do anything else. Just listening to the muddled sounds and the dampened light. She doesn't want to open her eyes, fearing reality will sting her back like chlorine. She decides to do a little bit of her and a little bit of Mr. Jones. She lets her breath hold her in suspension as she counts to ten, and opens her eyes.

The large black SUV stopped inches away from the side of her bike. Nia can smell the burning asphalt rising up from the tires. The grey-haired passenger's knuckles are white, as they press into the steering wheel. Wide eyes stare back at her, filled with anguish, so tense they don't blink.

Nia did, as she realizes she has to get herself out of trouble. She pushes her foot on the pedal of her bike to rush past the car. It barely moves. Nia lifts herself up from the saddle and puts all her weight into the pedal. It doesn't budge. She looks back up at the anxious man in his SUV. She can't wait for her bike. Sorry dad, she thinks to herself, as she jumps off her bike. After a few wobbly steps, she crashes into a

bush on the pavement. Spiky thorns pierce through the skin of her hands and her knees are chafed and throbbing. Nia gasps.

The sound of tires screeching, airbags inflating and alarms wailing hit her all at once. When she looks up, the first thing she notices is her granny bike, crumpled up under the wheels of the SUV. Smoke rises up from the car's hood. From the corners of her eyes Nia could see her library book laying on the asphalt, a soft breeze flipping its pages. Nia looks down at her bleeding hands, stung by flowers, not by metal. Nia wasn't quick. It was something else. It had to be.

Simon(e) van Saarloos

This was the first episode of The Asterisk Conversations, the Writers Unlimited podcast. The Asterisk*, or 'sterretje' in Dutch, signals intersections, crossings and the refusal of a final form.

The Asterisk Conversations is an initiative by me, host and writer Simon(e) van Saarloos, editor Ilonka Reintjens and Writers Unlimited. With thanks to the authors Nalo Hopkinson and Tirsa With and thank you editors Mitchell Renardus and Jörgen Gario Unom JG.

Episode 2 of The Asterisk Conversations will be launched shortly and will be with Pamela Sneed, author of *Funeral Diva*. The episode will include a contribution by poet Jolyn Phillips.