the Headlight Review

The following is a transcription from an in-depth interview with the poet and professor, Chioma Urama, and Co- Editorial Director Tyra Douyon. Some portions have been excised from the transcript at Tyra's discretion, or condensed for clarity and content.

Chioma Urama is a storyteller of Igbo and African American heritage. She creates and grounds channels through painting, poetry, prose, and oral storytelling. Using these mediums she creates pieces that question what has been shattered, exploded, and transformed in the cultural traditions of African American and Indigenous people. Her creations are the result of a deeply meditative process, connecting people, patterns, and ideas in efforts to heal herself and the collective.

A Body of Water is Chioma Urama's debut collection of poetry. Her poetry and fiction have been published in the *Southern Humanities Review, Pleiades, Blackbird, Paper Darts, the Normal School,* and *Prairie Schooner*. She received a Fred Shaw Fiction Prize and an honorable mention from the Lindenwood Review Lyric Essay Contest. Urama is a Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship alumna and a graduate of the University of Miami MFA program, where she was a Michener Fellow. She taught creative writing and English composition at the University of New Orleans. Her writing has been described as intuitive, intentional, and heart connected. Please visit her website https://www.chiomaurama.com for more information.

Tyra: When did you start writing *A Body of Water* and how long did it take you?

Chioma: So I started writing the poems around 2016 when I was still in my MFA. I was in my last year of my MFA, but a lot of the different poems that are in this collection have been answering questions that have been circling me my entire life. I started organizing the book around 2017 after I left Miami. I did my MFA in Miami and I moved to New Orleans which is a place where I have no connections and I didn't know anyone. I started writing because I wanted a better understanding of where I was heading. Most of my family stayed— I'm from the DMV area, from Virginia and a lot of my family is from Maryland and D.C. as well— and they stayed in that area for the majority of their lives. But I continued to move and leave and go to different states.

I wasn't really sure what I was searching for or what was missing, but I know that a lot of wisdom can be mined from the past, so I started looking back on my own past to examine where I was in the present.

Tyra: Okay, so you started it in 2016 and then it was published a few years later in 2021?

Chioma: Yes, I received the award in 2020 and then it was published in 2021.

Tyra: Okay. I think a lot of people go in with this idea that to write a book, if you really dedicate yourself, it can take 6 months to a year. You can get it out and published. But it's a process too and you have to live while you write through it and you might take breaks. I think it's important for our readers to know that because sometimes you can go in with the mindset that you should just be rushing this or by the time you graduate you should have something published. I know people push that narrative a lot.

Chioma: Yeah, yeah, to publish around graduation for sure. My intention with this collection wasn't publishing. For me it was to better understand myself and my own life. And I was thinking wouldn't it be wonderful if this was organized in some cohesive way that I could look at my entire life and for any generations that are coming after me, they wouldn't have to do this kind of searching to find certain ancestors or certain recipes, or places, people… we'll have one place where our information is collected. So that was why I started organizing it. It's important to think about why you want to put a book together. And not just because it's a thing that you feel like you have to do, but what is causing you to want to arrange these things in a specific way? And I think that can really support you in creating something that is your authentic self and really something that you're excited about creating. I think a lot of times you can get so caught up in doing what you feel like you need to or or what you're supposed to do. You don't actually care about what you're creating. And so that's something that gets lost in the artistry a lot.

Tyra: Absolutely. Like you said… [people] can get so caught up in wanting to publish and being known. Just to pause and ask yourself 'hey, what are you doing and why are you doing this' is so important. A second question off of that. You had all these individual poems written and then you found a cohesive theme and that's how you put together the collection?

Chioma: Yeah, I had all these poems that I put together. I was trying to better understand myself by understanding my family, my lineage, and my heritage. And so that's why I started organizing these pieces. I know a lot of time with Black or African-American families you get told different things in pieces. You get pieces of stories. Pieces of things. As I moved to New Orleans I started

doing a lot of ancestral work. Working with my ancestors and learning how to hear them and how to channel their voices. I wanted to organize this information. I wanted to figure out what it looked like when I wrote it down and put it in one place and how that can create meaning for where I am in my life.

Tyra: I know when I read *A Body of Water* I could feel that energy in the pages.

Chioma: (laughs, goodnaturedly) I'm so glad.

Tyra: *A Body of Water* includes poems that celebrate your African American heritage and others that reflect on traumatic experiences such as the history of enslavement. What inspired you to include these difficult topics in your collection?

Chioma: So, one of the things that I understand now from creating this collection is how connected we all are. When my grandmother was pregnant with my mother she's not only creating my mother but she was also creating the cells that would later become who I am. So everything that happened to my grandmother, the good and the bad, before and after conception I was also a recipient of in some way. And I knew I needed to look at that history in order to better understand the way that they lived and I lived. The way that I loved. The way that I leave things. And how I behave. And so that's what inspired me to include a lot of those ideas.

Tyra: I think we don't realize how much of who we are is a part of other people. It goes from your mom, to your grandmother, to your great-grandparents, father… all of these people that build that puzzle then there's a column of just you that you pass on to your next generation. That interconnectedness is so prevalent. Sometimes people think they're walking through this world alone, but they really aren't. Even if you don't think they have a strong connection with your family they are still very much with you in the way you think and do things and you might not even realize it.

Chiome: You said it perfectly. All those things are woven into who we are and we have to look back to unpack it or we'll continue to carry these things without really understanding why we are behaving or moving in certain ways.

Tyra: So unpacking… writing about these traumas in your family and in African American history… why specifically did you want to have poems about that and not make it a celebration of joy? I know that's something more people are saying– 'We want black joy, Black boy joy, Black girl magic…' What does it mean for you to include things that we don't want to talk about as much, especially right now.

Chioma: That's a good question. I was talking to a friend earlier this week and they were saying how with their depression comes joy. And it's like their joy is like this guardian of some of their lower states of consciousness right? It's pointing to where their attention needs to be given and how joy can better flow, right? If we tend to these sadder, more traumatic moments. So for me, getting to my joy, like writing this collection, was a big part of moving to my joy and learning what I do know, what is pleasurable and what is good for me. Sometimes we want to skip over the difficult part and that is something I never found to be realistic or practical or healthy for me. It's important to dive into those heavy emotions because the more that we're able to feel that sadness, the more pleasure we're able to open up to and actually feel, right?

Tyra: Yeah

Chioma: You can't selectively numb an emotion. You numb yourself to sadness, you're also numbing yourself to certain parts of pleasure and joy. And that's one thing I learned through this process of writing.

Tyra: Yeah, that's a really great point. We stop ourselves sometimes from going in that direction. It's like that quote, you won't know true joy unless you know true pain… unless you embrace that part that you want to hide from. I totally get that.

Tyra: What is your writing process—do you have a certain environment that helps you access memory, a certain routine?

Chioma: My writing process is deeply informed by Maureen Seaton who is one of my beloved professors and mentors and she's such a beautiful teacher. One of the things she had us do is to take an unruled notebook and within that unruled notebook you kind of have the freedom to be yourself on the page. You can add stickers or pieces of magazines or just like words you've heard, dreams… I have so many things. Just phrases that I enjoy, songs that I enjoy. I'm also an artist so sometimes I just start sketching something or illustrating something that I want to be on the page. So, I really give myself a lot of freedom to play within my writing process. I flip the book upside down. Nothing is linear, everything is all over the place. Completely chaotic.

Tyra & Chioma: (laughing, good naturedly)

Chioma: But when you really zoom out and look at it, it really begins to make sense in a really interesting way. You start to notice different patterns in your own writing. So this process allows you to see 'What are my patterns? Why are things that I care about? What are words that keep coming back to me? What are places I continue to revisit?' A large part of my process is being outside and putting my feet in the grass, you know, sitting beneath the trees and communing

with them. Being present with flowers and things like that. Just being out in nature and allowing myself to receive. It easily puts me in a state of receptivity.

Tyra: Yeah, Yeah

Chioma: That's what it looks like for me. Nothing linear. Lots of freedom. And lots of play.

Tyra: Yeah, I love that. [As you were sharing] I was thinking about my own writing process too because I'm a poet. I wanted to create a memory box. I'm working on poems about my grandmother and my family as well. To fill it up with pictures… and a lot of things are food related because my family is all about food and dancing and different types of laughter. The sound of dominoes clinking together… all these different memories… and I was thinking, how do I put this all together? So, I like the concept of doodling in a journal. I also like tangible things too. That might be a cool concept to get into.

Chioma: Yeah, a memory box sounds super special. I haven't made one of those in a long time.

Tyra: (laughs, goodnaturedly)

Chioma: That sounds like a lot of fun and I think that a lot of writers, the younger generation, they aren't writing with their hands anymore which I think is really interesting because you think in a different way when you have a pen in your hand versus when you're typing on a computer.

Tyra: Sure, sure

Chioma: So, you know whatever that means to each individual, like that's what it means to you, but I think it's something to consider. You think differently when you have a pen in your hand, when you have a crayon in your hand, when you have something tangible. When you're touching physical objects and items. For me it's important to get back to those practices.

Tyra: I love that. The world is so increasingly digital. I personally write, you know, my poems on a computer (laughs), but getting back to the paper and pen definitely is like a new experience for sure. You talked about being in nature and finding inspiration from the things that are around you. I think that's so important too… to just get outside of your usual place. Some people really thrive on routines like [they say], 'I wake up everyday at 5 AM and write for an hour.' It doesn't seem like you work within the confines of that. You're kind of like, 'I take from here and I take from here. I go outside. I sit by the window…' and you let it come to you. I really like that approach. You never know what is going to inspire you. It can lead to something really beautiful.

Chioma: Uhh humm, yeah like I take my notebook everywhere. Like I don't adhere to that 5 AM practice at all.

Chioma & Tyra: (laughing)

Chioma: It's like if somebody's talking and I'm enjoying what they're saying, sometimes I whip out my notebook and start doodling or writing what they're saying.

Tyra: Yeah?

Chioma: Because you know, I feel like writing is about living. And I think it's important to get back to that. To make sure you are living and having experiences to write about.

Tyra: I think with poetry it's a totally different beast, right? I did the 5 AM thing when I was working on a novel.

Chioma: Me too. (laughs)

Tyra: I think it works really well for fiction or nonfiction, but poetry lives and breathes in such a different way. You really have to be outside of yourself because you're really telling the truth, right? From beginning to end… so it's like how can you say your truth… I don't know, just for me… how can you say your truth within the confines of a schedule or a system? It's almost like the truth doesn't want to live within that. You have to be a little bit more free so you can see it from different angles. Poetry is just… different.

Chioma: I like how you said that. Poetry does need more room to move and breath. I agree.

Tyra: So, we kinda talked about this a little bit already. Family is a prevalent theme throughout the collection; what drew you to this subject matter?

Chioma: I think, especially in the U.S., we're encouraged to believe that the past doesn't matter. That's the whole idea of the American Dream, that you can start here and it's a fresh start and nothing else matters. But that couldn't be further from the truth. I see my life as a point on a timeline that extends both forwards and backwards and we talked about this, but all the events that have happened to my family have shaped everything about me. And until we consciously engage with those events they'll continue to shape the choices that we make, the behaviors that we have and we can respond from a place of trauma or reactivity versus actually being present with what's happening. And that's not to say that every choice my family has made has been an ill one, but I do recognize that was family has lived through the trauma of war and famine and enslavement and displacement and if we don't address these truths within

ourselves and examine how they impact our behavior we'll continue to pass on these patterns that no longer serve us.

Tyra: Absolutely. Everyone has been talking about generational trauma and childhood trauma and how do we address that, how do we overcome it? So, I love the conversations that people are having and how it's being pushed more to the forefront. Your collection really talks about that and gets to the root of that. Have you ever been hesitant to talk about your family and talk about the things you weren't present for, like someone else's story?

Chioma: Yeah, that's a good question. So, when I was initially writing this, I was writing for myself and I wasn't really thinking of publishing at all. I did my MFA in fiction. And so I wrote poetry, but I never saw myself as a poet. These were completely for myself, so I think I had a lot of freedom in that aspect of the writing. I was never thinking about an audience other than myself and maybe like one other person in the future that would come across it. And what was the second question that you had?

Tyra: Umm, how… were you ever hesitant to write about someone else's story? You said the audience wasn't on your mind and these poems were just for yourself, but what about the poems that you weren't present for, you weren't alive for. Did you ever feel weird about writing someone else's life?

Chioma: Yeah! Yeah, I think you always want to make sure that you get it right, but I think as I began to, umm, as I began to like commune with my ancestors more deeply and understand some of the things that they live through, I think it's important to give voice to things. Things are meant to be said and we're never going to get rid of the lens that is ourself. So, whatever I say is always going to be filtered through me and I'm going to touch those things. Uhh, there's no way to sanitize myself out of that experience and I don't think I wanted to. So, I did come to a point where I did feel comfortable with working with different voices and telling different stories.

Tyra: I wanted to speak about that specifically because I've been grappling with that myself like 'How much can you say? Do you want their name [in the poem]? Should you change their name? Should you have a conversation before you try and publish?'... things like that. So I always try and ask people how they approach that in their own work.

Chioma: Yeah, so another thing I want to say to that point is, when doing ancestral work, I think a lot of times we forget we can ask for permission directly. There have been a lot of poems I've written, not about my ancestors… sometimes you just know things… and umm there's a difference between knowing information and having the permission to share that information. So, I would just go direct and ask if it's okay for me to share this information? Is this something

you want me to lend my voice to? Because there's a lot of things we know knowledge of but it's important to ask. I think that can be lost a lot of the time in western culture— asking permission. Especially asking for permission from our ancestors, consulting them and letting them know this is my intention. My intention is pure, my heat is pure, is it okay for me to tell this story?

Tyra: Have you ever been told no?

Chioma: Yes. But that one poem it wasn't my ancestor, this was just information that I had and I wanted to share this poem in a certain way. And it was a really good poem, but it was like 'You need to stop telling this poem. You need to stop reading that. You know it's not for you.' And I was like, 'Oh, okay!' (laughs, goodnaturedly)

Tyra: I love that practice and I think that is so important. It will make you feel better as an artist, but also [you need to ask yourself]... Why are you saying this? Why are you bringing this up? It comes back to that reason you were talking about earlier… Why are you doing this? Why are you writing?

Chioma: Uhh huh, intention is important.

Tyra: Yeah, it is. Okay, let me ask some specific questions. The collection is split into three parts: Bridge, Groom, and Witness. What was the reason behind this separation and the titles?

Chioma: So, I was examining my family through the lens of my grandparents' marriage. My grandmother was a 15-year-old bride and my grandfather was a 19-year-old groom and I felt I needed to understand the experience of both of these blood lines to situate myself. So, in each section I'm examining their unique bloodlines, their unique experiences. And then in the section "Witness" I focus on the experiences of the children that were the result of these unions. So, I included pieces about my brothers and sisters and myself. And how the dissolution of my own parents' marriage made an impact on me.

Tyra: I love that separation. I know in other collections [authors] separate it just based on time or the progression of things… like summer, fall, winter… or how they got through things [referring to how Rupi Kaur separates her poems in her two published collections *Milk and Honey* and *the sun and her flowers*]. But to have two separate people and the result [of their union] coming down the middle? That definitely caught my intention. I was like 'Oh she's doing something different here.' That was pretty unique.

Chioma: Thank you! It started with my grandmother and asking questions about her experience. She started having children when she was 14 and she wasn't able to raise that child. Then she got married at 15 right away. So I began to ask her questions and that is what gave the entire collection shape.

Tyra: Yeah, having those stories is a goldmine. You know, being able to speak with your grandparents about their life and how things were. I mean, it's priceless information.

Chioma: Both of my grandparents, all of my grandparents are passed so it was a little bit trickier to get some of the facts, but it was a really enjoyable experience to learn how to communicate with them. For me I don't see death as a final destination. I see death as a transition, so if it is a transition to another form, [I've asked] 'How can I still communicate?'

Tyra: Yeah, I know with some things that I've done— my grandmother is alive, but she doesn't speak English— and she's lived with me my entire life. She speaks Creole. I'm Haitian and—

Chioma: (excitedly) Ohhh! I love Haitian people. I have so much respect for Haiti.

Tyra: (smiles, laughs goodnaturedly) Thank you! So, all my life— I write that in my poems— that we speak in laughter, clapping hands… I talk about how we communicated over time and it's not with words most of the time and I let that live in the poems and just write about her and the things I've been approaching. I have to go through my dad and then go through her. So, I get what you mean when you have to figure out how to get the information and how to get the language because you want to be authentic in your work and you want to tell the story as truthfully as possible. I just understand that.

Tyra: Your poem "A Google Search for my Ancestor "John Best," "Plantation," and "North Carolina" reminded me of the recent news story about a cabin that once housed slaves that was turned into an AirBnB. What significance did you hope to draw upon for your reader by including a poem about the missing sanctity of southern plantations?[**Airbnb Removed 'Slave Cabin' Listing In Mississippi Following Viral TikTok Takedown**]

Chioma: That's a good question. So, John Best was one of the names that I came across. He's an ancestor born in 1867, right after the abolition of slavery. So, when I saw his name I was so excited. I thought there would be some record of him doing something, or him living somewhere. So I thought, let me Google him. I went to Google and I naively put in that name thinking I was going to find my ancestral line and what came back to me were those search results. And in that moment I just cried; I was so upset. And I think it's important to allow ourselves the space to cry for the things our ancestors have moved through and the constant erasure they've experienced in America— in American history and in America's present. It's very

painful and it's hard that we don't always have the names of our loved ones or even a place that we can go to to pay our respects. At that moment, that absence just really just broke me open. I think now though that absence of a specific place allows me to be present with my ancestors wherever they are. Whenever I need them it allows me to go in nature and connect with them on a daily basis. But, I'm not surprised at the way America treats plantations. I'm definitely upset and enraged about it at times, but that disregard is present in all that they do. You can see that disharmony in every aspect of our society. We live in a society that is largely unwell. And if we were to pause and take a moment and trace it back… you can't disregard the history, the genocide, and enslavement and expect a nation to thrive.

Tyra: Yes

Chioma: It's not realistic. It's not going to happen and we see that. Those atrocities impact the direction of your entire life so no matter how much you want to wipe that slate clean and pretend that we can stand on a place where none of that existed is just not true. And it's not only African American people that are affected by it, but everyone in this nation. Everyone in this nation is touched by that history and they're touched by that disconnection and disharmony. I don't hold onto it anymore. It definitely still makes me angry, but I see that there is nothing I need to hold onto because the impacts are alive and well. And they will be alive and well until people are ready to address that history.

Tyra: There's so much that has happened. When the Black Lives Matter protests started again in the quarantine and distinctly when the backlash of that happened in schools… what they wanted to take out of the curriculum, who they were targeting, why they were targeting these people… people don't even realize the full scope of the effect of that. And I just remember when I saw that Tik Tok [video] I wasn't surprised. I don't know why anyone was surprised that they did that because like you said American history, true American history, African American history, is not taught in schools. It's not revered anywhere. I mean, you have the African American Museum in Washington, D.C., specific things like that, but it's just not talked about. And there's always some kind of backlash when you do want to bring it to the forefront and you just want to say, 'We're talking about Black history today. We're talking about Black people.' It's always an issue. It's always, 'What can we do to stop this'? I wasn't surprised by that video.

Editor's Note:

In her statement above, Tyra is referring to the formation of special interest groups and passing laws that targeted the educational sector following the BLM protests in 2020. These groups (in

collaboration with politicians around the country) have tried to ban over 2,000 books from American schools in several states. Over 40% of those books featured people of color as the protagonists and these books included topics about race, racism, discrimination, equity, and the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, numerous U.S. states have tried to outlaw an educational pedagogy called Critical Race Theory that has never been legally sanctioned (or widely used by educators) for use in K-12 public schools. The ideas around banning CRT escalated from banning teachers from discussing racism as a modern societal construct permeating American society (i.e., institutionalized racism, generational wealth gaps, and mass incarceration of Black and brown people), to try to ban the teaching of racism and the effect this has had on Black and brown communities in the past and in the present.

For additional sources please read the following articles:

https://www.propublica.org/article/georgia-dei-crt-schools-parents

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/whos-behind-the-push-to-ban-books-in-schools-180980818/

https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/

https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/states-that-have-banned-critical-race-theory

https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/05/09/florida-banned-textbooks-math-desantis/

https://www.npr.org/2022/04/28/1095042273/ron-desantis-florida-textbooks-social-emotional-learning

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/us/florida-rejected-textbooks.html

Chioma: Yeah, it's important for us to keep talking about our own history and not to minimize our own experience. Even in the way that our history is talked about it still feels minimized, to me in a lot of respects. Sometimes I feel that we should be sobbing. I remember in my MFA experience, especially in a lot of these literature courses, I was just angry… pissed off. And there was no regard for the sadness and anger that comes to brew. And a lot of the work that I'm doing now is about creating the spaces where we can move through those emotions together. Because it's one thing to talk about those situations and intellectualize it and another to [work through it] together in a group setting. Being in a group and allowing someone to witness you [can help you to] move through those emotions a lot easier.

Tyra: I really commend you for even approaching these topics because I have tried to do that before and it was just an angry poem. (laughs). Maybe that's it. Maybe the title is just "Angry Poem" and you keep going but I felt like, even though the anger is justified, there has to be a different way to talk about it and maybe I'm not the one. Anyone that approaches these topics I commend them for that because it's a lot of work and emotional labor.

Chioma: Yeah, it is a lot of work and I think it's interesting because you said you wrote an angry poem, but why can't we be angry? You know? Why can't we be angry? Why can't we be sad?

Tyra: Yeah… yeah

Chioma: There is space for those severe emotions as well and honestly those are the emotions that are begging to be seen and heard and validated. And like I said, we talked about this at the beginning, but there's so much joy, there's so much pleasure available but we can not get there if we continue to minimize our anger, minimize our saddness, and minimize our depression. Those are valid too. So yeah, I think ya know, you said you're writing the angry piece, those pieces are so important to the entire picture of this experience.

Tyra: Yeah, I agree with you because the concept of moving forward and having harmony is great, but not everyone is quite there. And some people are there and also at the same time they have this duplicity of feeling this full range of emotions and that should be championed as well, just right along beside it.

Chioma: Yeahhh

Tyra: Here's the next question. You use many poetic techniques in your collection. From lyrical free verse, to prose, and erasures; how does the formatting for each piece work to tell another narrative or reinforce your central theme?

Chioma: So, working with different forms I wanted the freedom to bring in the different voices and the different experiences of my ancestors and also a lot of the different voices that I hear culturally. And a lot of the different voices that I'm experiencing when [I'm] walking down the street or talking with my friends. I realized I would need a lot of freedom when I'm dealing with form because all of those people express [themselves] in different ways. And so when I was working with different forms I was thinking, 'What is the best way to bring forth this voice? How do they want to be represented on this page?' And so I think it was a lot of fun as well. I think sometimes when you're working on projects things can start to feel stale but it never really felt stale for me because I was jumping in and out from all these different voices and experimenting with different forms as well.

Tyra: I think that's great. So you just let the voice tell you how it wants to be written? Because I know some people get stuck [and ask themselves] 'Should this be prose? Should I rhyme here? Should I do some lyrics?' You kind of, again, feel from your ancestors and that's a main part of your creative process when it comes to the content and when it comes to the actual technique of writing it. It seems like you just have a lot of inspiration from others in your work.

Chioma: Yeah, for sure! I think with the way that I write as well, in the journal… on the pages with no lines, a lot of the pieces came out exactly the way that they were written on the page.

And I think writing in that way is a lot of fun as well. When I went back and was looking at those different voices, it was interesting to see the way that they came in on different ideas. What was interacting on each page. Whether it was an image that I drew or a certain shape the words were taking and thinking about what that means for each piece and how I might continue to explore that.

Tyra: Hmmm, yes, that's great… That's amazing.

Tyra: You reference your Nigerian Igbo heritage in several poems such as "Recipe for Jollof Rice" and "Ka Chi Fo!". Why were adding those parts of your identity so pivotal to the collections theme?

Chioma: So, those are also pieces of who I am. I am Nigerian and African American and both of those cultural experiences shape who I am, how I write, and how I move. And in this collection, I was collecting a lot of the things that have been lost. The dissolution of my parents' marriage led me to lose connection with a lot of the Nigerian side of my family so through those pieces I was going back and acknowledging what was lost and what I found. For me knowing how to make Jollof rice and knowing how to make it well is a very important part of Nigerian culture so when I learned how to make it I wanted to add it to this so it wouldn't be forgotten by me or anyone else. I was taking a breathwork class recently and the instructor in this course was talking about how we need to revisit the moments of trauma to regain our breath and in that traumatic moment that's where our breath gets stuck.

Tyra: Right!

Chioma: And we continue to breathe from that moment. A lot of the time it's a shallow breath because our breath gets stuck. So, you have to revisit that moment and breathe life into it. And so that's what these poems were doing for me. Going back and breathing life into these moments.

Tyra: I love that! And it can be hard to go back to that place where you felt the most low and everything was falling apart. Even sometimes when [you're] thinking about it like– 'Oh my gosh, I could never even think about approaching that situation again.' You kind of dance around it. Maybe you go down the street, but you're never right in that exact space so doing that work is so important. And I love what you said about learning how to cook Jollof rice. Food is such a big part of our culture and how we commune together.

Chioma: Yes!

Tyra: I've been doing that too. I recently texted my mom. I was like 'Please send me some family recipes.' My mom is from Nevis which is right next to St.Kitts in the Caribbean. [I said] please send me some recipes because as I'm writing I want to go back to that place and feel those emotions. I recently found the recipe for Haitian spaghetti that my grandma used to make. I wanted to learn how to make it myself after all this time.

Chioma: Yes, it's so special and so important to be able to make that food because that's how we nourish ourselves. Including that brings a different layer to a collection. When you're including pieces that [explain] this is how you nourish yourself, this is how you take care of yourself, this is how you treat yourself and others. And the Haitian spaghetti is very good!

Tyra & Chioma: (laughing)

Tyra: Yes, absolutely. And I think when you don't have the words or when your or your ancestors don't have the words, they have the food. They have the songs. They have dance. They communicate in so many other ways and take that because they might not be able to sit down and tell you everything that they went through, but they'll show you what they ate when they were a child. They'll show you what they danced to, what they listened to growing up. They'll show you how they sang. Those things are so important too.

Chioma: Yes, for a lot of women food was the art. They didn't have paintbrushes or maybe even pencils and pens, but you were in that kitchen and what you were creating, that was your art form. And you're passing it down. I'm glad that you're including it in your work as well.

Tyra: (enthusiastically) Yeahhh, I love that; 'food is the art'. Yeah, for sure.

Tyra: I appreciate your poems that question and push back against religion and conservatism. The poem "Jehovah's People" includes the powerful lines "...there would be no hymns, no ecstasy, no healing touch, only organized religion wrestling my child body into an unnatural quiet…" What is the message you are trying to convey to the reader in these poems? Why was that important to include in *A Body of Water?*

Chioma: I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness and I was the first generation in my family to be raised that way. In reflecting and questioning my family, I began to examine my own experience with religion. And growing up in that faith was always challenging for me from a young age. I knew that experience wasn't for me because of how controlled it felt. And I intuitively knew that that level of control had nothing to do with God and everything to do with something else. And so as I grew up I started going to churches and temples with my friends and seeing what their faith was and what they believed… and seeing how they lived and what they practiced. And I was a little jealous going into different sects of Christianity and seeing the ecstasy and the

fainting and the shouting and the dramatics, all of which were influenced by the Africans who were practicing Christianity. And I felt like if I had those religious experiences I would have felt more at home at church and in my body as well. I feel like now I know that's not true. But that's how I felt when exploring some of those different faiths. It was important to include spirituality because faith felt so restrictive to me. And it was chosen by my family because it felt like safety and it felt like love and it provided a contrast from the terror and the trauma that they experienced in the home. That allowed me to understand a bigger picture. Understanding how a religion that was so restrictive for me could feel like safety to someone else. And so through that process of understanding how that religion would be chosen I think I gained a greater respect for the different religious choices that people make.

Tyra: That's really profound. Just the fact that for you it can be one thing and for someone who is so close to you, your mom, the rest of your family, it can mean something completely different. I totally understand that. While I'm not a Jehovah's Witness I grew up Seventh-Day Adventist and it's extremely restrictive as well.

Chioma: I heard they branched off of each other.

Tyra: Yeah, they are really closely related. We are kindred spirits here.

Chioma and Tyra: (laughing)

Tyra: So, when I read that in *A Body of Water,* I was like 'I have to talk to her about this. This is— I just understood so much of what you were saying. The restrictive part but also seeing it as a home in some ways or a routine, a habit, whatever. You know it's a part of you that needs to be rooted out, but it's also so engrained at the same time. With Christianity, with some of the denominations, people are discouraged from questioning. You go a lot of your life having these small moments of wanting to question things, but you're not "supposed" to do that. It's very interesting and it's hard to even come to terms with how you feel about it when your family is within that religion and you have all these thoughts, but who do you speak with if the person you are speaking to is saying, 'Don't have these thoughts because if you questions things too much than you'll lose your faith."

Chioma: Yeah, it's very conflicting and a challenging way to grow up. I don't know, and I was trying to think with some friends who were also raised as Jehovah's Witnesses, as a child I just knew. I don't know if it was an angel or what, I just knew this is not right. And there was something in my brain and my body that shut me off to what people were saying within that space. I think those experiences within the Jehovah's Witness faith, those were my first experiences with disassociation because I knew something was not connecting. And I knew this wasn't for me. And I knew this was not right. And so I just began to disassociate from those

experiences a little bit and ummm yeah, dissociation is something challenging to work through. To be present in my body now and I can also see how it served its purpose.

Tyra: Yes.

Chioma: From protecting me from certain ideas and individuals probably as well.

Tyra: The fact that you can call back and know this is the time that I started to think something was different and then to go so far as… 'Let me see how other people do it. How do they worship?' … and trying to glean some information from them… I think people push away from religion and Christianity but they never really come back and say, 'Is there another way? How are my friends doing it or even looking at different faiths?' I think that's exceptional because a lot of people don't take that approach. I know for me I went to a mosque with my friend one time when we were in a different country and it was Ramadan. She wanted to go and she needed someone to go with. And it just opened my eyes completely. [I said to myself], Wow, this is totally different from anything I had growing up. [I started to think] there really is another way. You understand and you know there are other religions, but it's different]when you're invited in. It was a total switch for me.

Chioma: Yeah, it's really beautiful to witness other faiths as well.

Tyra: We're all connected. We're all connected at some point.

Chioma: Yes, on some level.

Tyra: There is a connection between African American enslavement and the Black church. Are poems like "Jehovah's People" meant to question the rigidity of the church and/or call for reform?

Chioma: So, I needed to question the rigidity of religion to understand how that could feel safe for someone else. If you're growing up in a household where you feel unsafe, where you're experiencing abuse or assault– whether that spiritually, physically, emotionally– a rigid religion might feel like a breath of fresh air, right? Because you go to church and you know exactly what's going to happen. This book has the songs and we're going to sing at these times and this is when church starts and stops.

Tyra: Yeah.

Chioma: I know some churches are orderly about time. I know that some other Christians have different experiences around time, but umm, yeah, you get information on who you can talk to, who you can befriend and that rigidity can feel like safety to someone who is coming from a

disorganized or chaotic environment. I can understand why it can feel good to some members of my family. I don't think we can really reform anything if we don't understand the choices that we're making. A lot of time, more than reform, what we need is respect. And I say that knowing how challenging that can feel, but I think that religion is exactly perfect for some members of my family. It answers questions that arise from their experience. It meets needs for them that are important for them and I can respect that. I can also acknowledge and respect that that religion is not in alignment with my soul and my experiences and my unique sets of needs. So, it's something that is definitely still challenging for me. I don't want to say that I just move with so much respect for this faith because I've had traumatic experiences within it [too], but I know that in the larger picture– especially when we look at what's happening with religion around the world, wars being created over religion– I think it's really important to move with a lot more respect and understanding.

Tyra: Yeah, that's really important and a mature way to think about it especially if it doesn't align with who you are and you're not going to continue with it. Just to realize that some people need a map. Some people like to know this is where I can go and this is where I can't go. This is the time that I should be there and the time I should not be here. Just realizing hey it might not be for you, but it's for someone else and that's okay and as long as they're not causing horrible harms– and I know like you said there are still things about Christianity that are harmful, about all religions that are harmful– but if they are acting with pure intentions and aren't causing psychological or physically harm intentionally to anyone I think that you leave it.

Chioma: I think needing to know who you can talk to and who you can't [for example]... that safety is also an illusion, right?

Tyra: Yeah

Chioma: That's not real safety. It's the illusion of safety, but I understand how that can be confronting to believe that… this is a safe environment and this is okay. And we see that happen all the time in different religions. People are giving their trust to individuals who don't necessarily deserve it, but they're within the same faith. I think it's about understanding and respecting the choice which leads someone there. It doesn't necessarily mean that I agree with what's happening there or that everyone there has pure intentions. I don't think I always have pure intentions, right? We're human, but… religion tries to create control around that human experience. But you can't control what everyone is going to do and how they are going to behave in certain situations. But I understand how people can be confronted moving in certain spaces where everyone is holding the same ideas as them.

Tyra: Right, because that pattern, that rigidity maybe is not so rigid to someone that thinks, 'Well this is just my life and this is how it goes.' And that's okay in some situations, but I get what you're saying.

Tyra: What are you working on now? Can you give us a glimpse into your next project?

Chioma: Yes! I'm not a fan of labels, but I'm wearing the label of storyteller and I feel like that gives me the space to create what I want to create. Umm, so within that label I feel like I can do the things that I do naturally which is prose, poetry, painting… Right now I'm thinking more about oral storytelling and how sound is important in expression. There are certain things that are only available sonically that are important to a message. So, I've been thinking a lot about oral storytelling and how to tell some of those stories within our communities where we don't often hear and how do we hone in on voices that we're not cognizant of or always listening to. I just finished a studio artist residency in July and in that residency I was exploring Ibo art more deeply and looking at symbolism and different things like that. There are a lot of things that I'm balancing right now. I think my main priority is nourishment as we talked about and really making sure that my body is really present and grounded and available for life. I think in the stretch of the last two years my body has been pushed to the limits of stress, so it's really important for me to go back and make sure I'm really nourishing myself with the things that I'm eating. With the relationships that I'm in, with the places that I spend time in. So, I've been writing a lot less– which is not to say that I'm still not writing a lot— but umm, it's more so venting, journaling, like this needs to get out vs like consciously creative writing, but who knows? Sometimes that venting turns into something creative.

Tyra: Yes, yes, you're doing the living right now. There's this quote that I read a couple of years ago. And it said sometimes you write and sometimes you're doing the living to do the art. It's an eb and flow. Some people, ya know, live and do the art at the same time and that's their process, but for some [they] need a moment or two, years, to just live and feel things and do things. Then [they] come back around. I'm trying to figure that out myself. Like what kind of artist am I? Do I live and do my art at the same time or do I live and come back to it. It sounds like you're in the living phase. (laughs)

Chioma: Definitely in the living phase, being present phase. Umm, but yeah, as I was thinking about these different questions I was saying, 'I want to write again. I want to have this experience again. I know I'm working my way back to writing more poetry again."

Tyra: Yes, and we want to hear from you! We're looking for that next publication. Your loyal fans, your readers, I'm one of them! (laughs, goodnaturedly)

Chioma: Aww, thank you so much! I think the next thing that I'm putting out for sure is umm I don't want to call it a podcast, but essentially it is a podcast, but that's something I'm potentially putting out soon.

Tyra: I can't wait to see that. I'll definitely be listening!

Chioma: Awesome!

Tyra: Well, that is the end of my question set. Chioma, thank you so much for coming to this interview. We really appreciate it and I'm excited to get this posted.

Chioma: Awesome and thank you for your beautiful questions. This was a really good experience.

Tyra: I'm so glad!

Chioma: Thank you so much, Tyra.

Tyra: Have a good rest of your day.

Editor's Note: Check out Tyra's book review on *A Body of Water, also available on* *www.theheadlightreview.com*

Thank you for reading!