

## 5.6 A Forensic Level of Honesty: Aminatta Forna and Nicole Rizzuto (AV)

### Transcript

#### **Aarthi Vadde**

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde, and we are here in Season 5 of this podcast's run, delighted to continue bringing you dialogues between some of the most fascinating writers and thinkers around.

Today you are in for a treat as we have novelist Aminatta Forna and critic Nicole Rizzuto in the studio, or the Zoom-io, to talk about Aminatta's novels of migration, memory, and the more-than-human world. Both are currently teaching at Georgetown University, where Aminatta is currently the Director and Lannan Foundation Chair of Poetics at the Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice. She is the author of, most recently, a collection of essays called *The Window Seat*, which orbits around the genre of travel writing but also takes it in new and unexpected directions. Before that, she wrote several beautiful novels, including *Happiness*, *The Memory of Love*, and *Ancestor Stones*. *The Memory of Love* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2011, and all of her novels have been on numerous shortlists.

So welcome, Aminatta, thank you for coming today.

#### **Aminatta Forna**

Thank you for having me.

#### **AV**

And now I'm going to be introducing my dear friend, Nicole Rizzuto, who I think we have been in dialogue for almost a decade, if not more at this point. Nicole is an associate professor of English at Georgetown and author of an excellent book that I have used and taught called *Insurgent Testimonies: Witnessing Colonial Trauma in Modern and Anglophone Literature*. And she is now, or she's just co-edited a collection called *The Aesthetic Life of Infrastructure*. Her current book project, like Aminatta's latest writings, have turned to matters environmental. The work in progress is called *Arresting Ecologies: Global Literatures Across Land, Air, and Sea*. Nicole, so glad you could be here.

#### **Nicole Rizzuto**

Thank you for having me. I'm really excited for the conversation.

#### **AV**

Me too. And here's where I step back and hand you the virtual mic, Nicole.

#### **NR**

Great, thank you. Aminatta, first of all, I am thrilled to be here with you. I've been admiring your work for so long, and this is the first time I'm going to really get to have a deep dive with you, so I'm very excited. And I wanted to actually begin not with one of your novels, but in fact with your memoir, which was published in 2002. And I just wanted to talk about, just to get us into the conversation, a brief moment towards the end of the memoir, when we're in book two, and you're now gone from being a child to 25 years later, when you describe something about, something around the kind of turning point at this point in the process of looking back and trying to kind of reconstruct the story around your father and his arrest and trial.

So at a certain point, you say, talking about how you could speak or how you felt you had to self-censor, say, "When I made a new acquaintance, I did not tell that person my story. If the same person became my friend, I might volunteer no more than the barest fact. People are bored or dismayed by African politics. There is no glamour in the association, just shame, a collection of failed states, which have never learned to govern themselves. The subject just made people uncomfortable. But partly, I did not volunteer any information, because, well, I didn't have much to give."

And I just wanted to start here to see, to ask you about how you think about how these issues might inform your fiction, as well as your non-fictional writing.

**AF**

Well, hello, and thanks so much for having me. I'm looking forward to this conversation myself. It's funny, you know, yesterday I was introduced to somebody at an event at Georgetown, and the person who introduced me mentioned the fact that I was from Sierra Leone, and there then began a conversation about how miserable and difficult a place Sierra Leone was. And this is something that has stopped those of us who come from African countries most of our lives. It almost seems to be an opening, an opening into a conversation about what the problems of Africa are, whichever country we're talking about, right? Last year I was in Kenya. I mentioned to somebody I'd spent the summer in Kenya doing some work. First thing they talked about was corruption in Kenya.

And I've spent a lot of time thinking about this and thinking about the ways in which a continent has come to represent something to people who live outside that continent. And it's been written about quite a lot, I'm not the first person to point this out, that almost, that *Heart of Darkness* has become the kind of overarching paradigm in which the continent is viewed. And there came a point in my life before I became a writer, when I was a journalist for the BBC, where I realized that almost every narrative, every narrative, whatever it came from, that dealt with an African country was pretty much a rewriting of *Heart of Darkness*, not a reimagining, a rewriting of heart of darkness. So, you know, people went there from outside, bad things happened and people escaped. And so I've been, you know, I've been very, very aware of this all my life. And that has in, when I was younger, inhibited discussions I wanted to have about, you know, my relationship with my own country, because there was a starting point in those conversations that I would have to overcome, a sort of reflex on the part of the listener that I would have to overcome.

How it informed my writing is this, that I decided to approach my subject with, in an almost forensic level of honesty, and to use myself as the lens of that. And, you know, I come from two worlds, I am Sierra Leonean, and I'm also British, and I grew up all around the world. So I have a multiplicity of views. And I was very aware, not just of how African countries, like Sierra Leone is seen, but also how those

countries view other parts of the world. And so one question that I ask constantly is, if you see us like this, how do you think we see you? Right? Why don't you turn your gaze on your own country? Or why don't you view your country through the lens of our country?

So to me, to me, the way I approach storytelling is prismic. Now, it's about looking at something through different lenses. And in most of my books, and I would say both the fiction and the nonfiction, *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, but also the fiction that followed it, *The Ancestor Stones*, and *The Memory of Love*. It's really one of the things I have done very consciously is to reverse the gaze. So I allow the reader to look at the conventional gaze, the outside upon Africa, but then I flip it. And then I say, here's how Africa looks when it looks at Africa. And I'm using Africa as shorthand here. But here's how Africa looks when it looks at Africa. And here's also how Africa looks when it looks at you. And it's a way of, you know, as I say, of bringing a sort of prismic gaze to lend to my work.

**NR**

What do you think about the category of the African writer? Do you think that this is a useful category at all? I mean, what are your thoughts on that?

**AF**

I don't know what it means. And I also don't understand why it's come to attach to Africa. Because, you know, I have a friend, well, he's not, an acquaintance, a friend, Kazuo Ishiguro. And I always think, why is this conversation not attached to him? Right? Why are people not asking whether he's Japanese? Is he Japanese? Is he British? He sets his books all around the world, and he sets them in fictional worlds as well. You know, completely make-believe worlds, speculative fiction, if you'd like to call it. And yet there isn't this sort of extraordinary conversation around him, or even Joseph Conrad. You know, Joseph Conrad's books are taught in the African canon, and yet this guy was a Polish guy who traveled around the world.

So, you know, I think, my hunch is this. My hunch is that this all came around for two reasons. One, because of academic empire building. You know, somebody wanted to claim Africa. And actually, where there is a somewhat similar discussion going on is around the Indian writers. Who qualifies as an Indian writer or not? If you write in English, are you an Indian writer? Is Salman Rushdie an Indian writer if he doesn't live there and doesn't write in English? But it really has coalesced around African writers in a way that is quite bewildering to me. I mean, so I think partly it's about empire building. And I think it's also about the trope of authenticity, which has, you know, really, really come into the forefront in the late 20th and early 21st century. Like, there is such a thing as an authentic writer, you know, who somehow is emblematic of a voice from somewhere that is untainted by anything else.

And, you know, it really is a load of BS. I mean, it really is a load of BS. I mean, none of us in the world are untouched by influences from elsewhere. Africa has been washed through with colonial influences and before that imperial influences and before that trade influences and before that slaving influences. If you even look at the history of Sierra Leone, you see the forced migration and return of many, many groups of people. And I'm not even just talking about the enslaved Africans who, you know, came and went in various iterations. I'm also talking about Nigerians who have immigrated and emigrated from that coast. Malians, my family actually is Malian, right? It's not Sierra Leone at all. As our oral history told us, told me, and later backed up by a little Christmas DNA test, my husband decided to give me that

we're actually Malian. So, you know, the idea that anywhere is static that anywhere has this level of authenticity is really bizarre. But it has come to a touch around African writers. And I think as I say, it's because there is some sort of dream of authenticity, which somehow everybody else is free from, but we must subscribe to.

## **AV**

Could I ask you how that view of identity also relates to the Christmas DNA test? Because that is such an interesting, I suppose, biological view of identity, and this idea that one can find one's roots in a genetic fashion. And it's not something that is to be laughed at in any way because it's a very serious search for roots. And at the same time, you see, for example, in the Indigenous community, a real resistance to having someone claim tribal membership solely on the status of a DNA test. So, I'm just curious if you've given more thought to or if this was just kind of a lark, like the role that those types of tests and websites about genealogy—

## **AF**

Oh, yeah, it came out of somewhere. It came out of somewhere. I actually, I like DNA tests because I think they prove that we are all from everywhere, right. I mean, I know one person who's come out with a DNA test that pretty much proves them 100% from somewhere. But I don't know, hardly anybody who hasn't come up with, you know, a thousand strands of ancestry. So I like them for that reason. They dispute the idea of the single identity, even if you may be able to trace your roots to one somewhere.

Anyway, it turned out that there was a story in my husband's family, which there's a story in my husband's family that they had Native American blood. Now, my husband is British, right? My husband is white British. And this seemed somewhat unusual an idea that they should have Native American blood. But it was even more unusual, given the fact that I had dated somebody from just about the same part of Britain as he was from, is from, and they too had the same story that they had Native American blood in their ancestry. And I thought that that was very curious, really curious. This is Suffolk, in the east of England. Why would there be, you know, Native American women wandering around?

So I, but then I was talking to a South African friend of mine. And now here's a country with a history of, you know, as solid as America's of racial apartheid. And he said it's Jewish blood. He said their ancestors were hiding Jewish blood. And he said that's the way people used to do it. You didn't want to say you had Jewish ancestors, but you would point to the dark eyes and the nose and everything and you would say it was Native American.

Now, of course, this generation know nothing about it. And in fact, when I got my husband a DNA test, because it was Christmas and they were discounted. And I said, come on, let's get to the bottom of this story. He didn't have any Jewish blood at all. And he didn't have any Native American blood at all. Turned out that it was Spanish. And my guess is that that if there's truth to this, which we don't know, if there's truth to it, of course, anti-Catholic feeling was as strong as anti-Semitic feeling 100 years ago in Britain. So it might well be that another story arose. Who knows why? And, you know, we don't know either. So I've always, I do find the DNA tests kind of fascinating. And, you know, things pop up and things go away, you know, as more and more, more and more material gets added and more and more the database gets wider and wider, you see your profile changing all the time. So I would suggest to anyone who does their DNA test not to get to attach to the results.

**NR**

I feel like I can hear your forensic tendencies coming out in your answers, too.

I wanted to ask you so because you're not only a novelist, as we said, you're also a journalist, you write essays, you write criticism. One of the questions I had is, do you know when there's a particular topic that asks you to write in a particular mode? Like, do you know this has to be in the mode of fiction? So does that always happen? Does it sometimes happen?

**AF**

It happens, but slowly. So I will just say about journalism, you know, I mean, I wasn't born a journalist, I became a journalist because I had to earn a living and I thought it was a really good way to tell stories and pay the rent. That didn't quite work the way I hoped. I mean, it did, I learned wonderful things as a journalist, you know, I learned research, I learned, you know, structure and storytelling and all kinds of things. And it served a nosy person very well to be able to go into anyone's life and ask questions. But, you know, I never saw myself as primarily a journalist, I saw it as part of my journey towards being a writer.

But in order to answer your question, yes, I do know when an idea lends itself better to fiction or nonfiction, but I don't always know immediately. It can take quite a long time. And the process is this. Usually, I have a question that I wish to answer that is bothering me. And I can carry that question around for a very long time. I mean, when I say very long time, it can be a decade, right? I mean, and, you know, there's a multiplicity of questions anyway. But at some point, something arises that tells me, it shows me the way to tell this story.

So, I can give you an example. I was always fascinated as a dog lover by the difference between the way people in the West responded to dogs and people, for example, in Sierra Leone, responded to dogs and the way in which one saw the other. So this takes us back to the idea of reversing the gaze. So I would see Westerners who were working for NGOs come to Sierra Leone and they'd be horrified by what they saw was the treatment of the dogs. And yet what I saw was very, very, very poor people, people who lived in the poorest country in the world, doing their very best by creatures who were weaker than them, right? They didn't send them to kill shelters. I mean, they didn't dress them in little tartan coats and give them presents under the Christmas tree either. But they didn't send them to kill shelters. You know, they didn't call them mutts if they weren't pedigree, right? They didn't breed them for their looks. You know, there were all sorts of things that they didn't do that was, which would be regarded as, you know, cruel by those people. And yet, you know, here was a society, visiting members of a visiting society saying that the way we were treating our dogs was cruel just because they weren't defleaed because no one could afford to do that. And they didn't live inside houses and they weren't petted and given collars and various things.

Anyway, I was, you know, I was always baffled and fascinated by that. But then really, one day, the story just dropped into my lap and it came in the form of a particular person. And that was a man called Dr. Jalloh. And he is Sierra Leone's only veterinarian, right? We've got one vet in the country. And that is Gudush Jalloh. And he comes to the house to help a dog that had been adopted off the street give birth. And then when he couldn't help it, we all transferred the dog to the surgery. And then he performed an emergency cesarean on this little dog. And the devotion was just extraordinary. And I decided that he

was the vehicle for this story. And so I spent two weeks with him working in his assisting and observing and working in his veterinary practice. And it became an essay published by *Granta* called "The Last Vet".

When I think of nonfiction, I think of a found story. Like, you know, and one of the things I do with my students as I show them two pictures by, two Picasso works. One is a painting of a bull. So that's his eye. He's taken it to a flesh and blood bull. And that's what that's what he sees. But then I've got another bull and it's a sculpture by Picasso. And it's a handlebars of a bicycle and a bicycle seat. Right. And all he's done is he's placed them like one above the other. And he's made a bull's head. And so that's how I think of nonfiction. It's the found story, right? You find the elements of it. And then writer's eye is there, but it is in the rearranging or arranging of found elements.

**NR**

Oh, that's really fascinating. And actually, I want to kind of follow up on this question about animals, especially because yes, definitely in *Happiness*, it's all about, you know, this woman Jean who is studying urban foxes. And Attila, the Ghanian psychiatrist that she encounters. And the encounter is also staged around like a fox who's making, you know, like the fox is making their way across the city. And when you were talking about the idea of the gaze and the animal gaze, I literally wrote in the margins of that book, asked Aminatta about how she imagines the gaze of animals. Because not only in *Happiness*, but it also seems to me that in *The Hired Man*, there are a lot of things going on that have to do with how we imagine relationships between human and nonhuman animals.

And so, one of the questions, you're so careful about kind of marking both differences and perhaps affinity. So, I was just wondering, like, how do you go about representing nonhuman animals? How do you novelize them? What do you think about?

**AF**

That's such a good question. It's because sometimes it's these questions can be a little tough to answer, because sometimes we don't really know how other writers do it. And I think the answer is this. I sincerely believe that animals have a consciousness. It may not look like ours. I don't know exactly what it does look like in the sense that we don't really know what anyone else's consciousness looks like. But the idea that animals are nothing more than just, you know, a collection of nerve endings and automated responses strikes me as, anyone who knows anything about evolution, mammal evolution, strikes me as pretty absurd, really. They are more than just the sum of their parts.

When you mention *Happiness* and the foxes, this to me, I was having the same response to the foxes as I was having to the dogs in Sierra Leone. London, if you don't know, is absolutely overrun with foxes. And the part of London that I live in is particularly overrun with foxes. And I used to watch them happily from my study window, playing in my garden every single year. I'm also aware that many people in the city loathed them and wanted them exterminated. And I would think, why? Why? This is a creature just trying to exist. All it's trying to do is exist. And all you're trying to do is stop it existing.

**AF**

If I can, I would love to ask you if I could possibly have you read a passage from one of your novels for me. And this is from *Ancestor Stones*. And I'd like you to read this so that I can ask you some more

questions about some other themes that overlap with animals and the animal world, but other things as well. And so the passage that I'd like to talk about is, it begins at the end of *Ancestor Stones*, which is a novel that takes us through many years and generations through the eyes of four different women who are speaking, these four aunts who are speaking to a niece addressed as Abie.

“Suddenly I heard a great rush of wind, as though a whirlwind was racing towards me. I braced myself and waited. Nothing. The grass and trees stood straight. And yet the sound went on, becoming louder, filling my ears, rushing around my head. I felt myself becoming unsteady. I looked down at the ground and at my feet. I reached out for something to support myself, found a bollard and leaned against it.

“There was a Creole graveyard below me, very old, at least one hundred years. I saw a crowd of mourners walking between the graves. They were carrying several coffins. It looked as though a whole family had died. But even though they were dressed as bereaved people, instead of weeping, the relatives appeared almost unconcerned. One or two were even laughing openly as they hoisted the boxes towards the waiting graves.

“I looked and looked again. Something strange. I could see straight through the flimsy wood of the coffins. There were no bodies inside, only piles of sticks. The mourners were talking to each other, I could see their mouths opening and closing. I was too far off to hear what they were saying, though the calls of the market traders reached me. It was as though they were communicating soundlessly, like animals. And I alone seemed to see them. The people in the market went about their business, bargaining and bantering with one another. Other strangers walked between the stalls. A young woman buying sweet potatoes stood right next to one of them, who stared lasciviously at her breasts. When she turned around she brushed past him, but never so much as glanced his way.

“A fist of fear squeezed my belly. Trailed its fingertips slowly across my scalp. Sapped the strength from my muscles. I gasped, choking on my own breath. Drops of moisture rose on my forehead. I let go of my load. The plastic bags tumbled down the hill, tearing open, all of my oranges bouncing away. A dread filled me, a dread unlike any I had ever felt. Not the terror of God, or his angels, but the sickly fear of man.

“I saw them returning at night, moving between the headstones and the mausoleums, indistinguishable from the shadows, from the dark shapes of the statues. Great slabs of stone and marble were heaved aside, coffin lids swung open. I saw the graves open up, the spirits of the dead walk away from their resting place.

“Then just as suddenly the vision disappeared. It was market day again. A little boy, naked but for a pair of shorts, was standing next to me holding my shopping bags. Another boy had climbed up the hill and was holding out the last of the runaway oranges. They were both smiling up at me, thinking of the coin I would give them, ignorant of everything I had just witnessed.”

**NR**

Thank you. So I ask you to read this passage because it is presented in an extremely striking, interesting way. It is one of the most ambiguous presentations in the novel. What's presented to us that seems as though it could be a vision, as Mariama describes it, or even a delusion, perhaps, as it's framed within the kind of psychoanalytic theme, we then discover, in the next paragraph, is actually a historical reality.

It's a fact that then becomes translated. So my question is, why did you decide to present the scene this way, with this ambiguity?

**AF**

Mariama is somebody who is suffering from what we might call PTSD. But there's a discussion throughout all of my work, which really began with the character of Mariama of what exactly is PTSD and how does it manifest itself in a country in which people have dealt with and faced numerous challenges. And Mariama is somebody whose life has been one of considerable challenge. She's the daughter of a, she's born with a disability. She has a dysfunctioning eye, the side of her face is paralyzed, and an arm and she limps. She was born of a mother who believed in one set of gods and a father who believed in a different god and who destroyed the mother's mental health by refusing to allow her to worship in the way she wished. She was raised by missionaries and had her name changed and her Sierra Leonean Temne identity stripped away and replaced with a Christian one and then sought to regain who she was later in life.

So it has always raised many questions to me about what exactly do we call, or at least how, is it trauma and is this trauma that's being manifested. But at the same time I was also thinking about the ways in which people were beginning to talk about what had happened in Sierra Leone and at that time. And I do a lot of research for my novels. They are based in factual accuracy. So, I spent a lot of time talking to women for *Ancestor Stones*, women from the age of about 60 years old to 90 years old. Because these lives were not lives you could research in a library. Nobody had written about the lives of Temne women in late 19th and early 20th, mid-20th century. So, I wanted to find out all about what it had been like to go through all of these things, first elections, I don't know, independence, marriage, childbirth, fashion, even how did they do their nails and their hair on their wedding day. I mean absolutely everything.

So I had many, many, many conversations with Temne women and one of them said, I said, what did you think when the war began in the lead up to the war? And she said, well, she said, we knew and had known for many years that the underground was rising. And it was such a chilling statement that there was a sense that the country was heading somewhere. And you know, it is, I now know exactly what people mean by that because I, because you can feel it when a country is losing its direction.

Right, I'll leave that hanging there for a moment.

**AV**

I think we got the hint.

**AF**

That phrase, the underground is rising, so struck me as a way of talking about upheaval, right. This absolute upheaval where all civilized or signs of civilization simply become lost. I mean, they are gone and their neighbors are killing neighbors, kids are turning on parents, every order you thought existed no longer exists. And I thought that that was an extraordinary way to encapsulate that idea, the underground is rising.

So with Mariama, Mariama, because she is an old Sierra Leonean woman with a disability and only a certain amount of formal education, it's not treated with the utmost seriousness in her society. But Mariama is the person who sees what is happening. Right, she is, she both literally sees it and she sees it



on some other plane as well, in ways she can't always articulate. So, when I discovered that, in fact, the way in which the rebel army had got their weapons into Freetown was by posing as mourners. Right, that is how they got their weapons into Freetown. They staged these funerals and they stacked the coffins with, you know, hand grenades and AK-47s and things like that and then they buried them in this graveyard called King Tom and then they came at night and took them out. I began to imagine what it would look like, what it would look like in reality but also to somebody who is slightly dissociated from herself.

**AV**

Two seasons ago we did a whole season devoted to translation and one of the writers we spoke to was Boris Diop who had switched from writing in French to writing in Wolof and then switched and then would work on that translation of Wolof back into other languages, into English, into French, and he talked about doing that because he said when he heard stories in his head he heard them in his mother's voice and so for him writing in French was always, like as he put it writing with the light on and the windows closed so that I couldn't hear the voices of my family or my people.

And so I know Nicole you also have worked a great deal on untranslatability or on, you know, the stories of people who don't always travel and so how do both of you think about, Aminatta, your novels have been translated into many languages, about the way the novels would return home, whether some of the people who are in the novels might read those novels in their vernacular or native tongues, is that a possibility that one could imagine, you know, making a reality? This is for either of you.

**AF**

This was a big issue for me. I don't speak Temne well enough and so I learned it a lot in order to write the book and, but Temne doesn't have or doesn't yet have or may just have had a written orthography. They were working on one, the university in Sierra Leone was working on one and then the war came and all the linguists, you know, were forcibly stopped, were forced to stop work on it and then they picked it up again after the war. So it's only very recently got a written orthography. So to write it in Temne would, you know, would have been impossible for me even if I spoke Temne that well. I decided to learn Temne, which is the language that my parents always spoke around me all the time, but you know, if you, I mean, because of the situation in my family, we were so often in exile, they as immigrant, well, my parents weren't immigrants, they were exiles, but anyway, as displaced parents often do, they use the original language to talk about their children in.

**AV**

I know that too well. Yeah, I know that too well. And if you speak it yourself, you're never saying it in the right accent or the right pronunciation, you can never speak like they can.

**AF**

So I was irritated that I didn't grow up speaking Temne. So I made my mother teach me. She was actually at that point displaced in the war. She was staying with me and we used to go for long walks every day and we just figured out the language orally and I just wrote it down the way I thought it sounded right. And the only, I mean, I speak some French and I speak some Spanish and that was my template, I had to use a romantic language. And that more or less worked in constructing the grammar.

The only thing it didn't work on was the plurals because in Temne, it's the front of the word that changes, not the end of the word that changes. And I never really got my head around the plurals, to be honest. I mean, I'd have to say, can I have many, many apple because I just couldn't figure out.

But then what I did, because most of my female relatives in Sierra Leone speak Temne, I recorded all the interviews in Temne. And then I had, but I had someone helping me with the translation just to make sure I had it all right. And then what I did when I wrote the book was I tried to recreate the sound of the language, the rhythm of the language. And actually, some things worked and some things didn't. There's a lot of repetition in Temne. And I realized that when I was putting all that repetition on the page, it was just getting in the way of the narrative. I might do it if it was an actual bit of dialogue, but I wouldn't do it if it was just in the voice of or in a prose voice. So I really, you know, I really tried to make it sound like Temne.

And I actually was approached by a musicologist who said that she had measured parts of the text and that there were certain repeated rhythms through the book. So, you know, I took that as a compliment. But it was what I was aiming for. I was making it to sound like somebody was speaking to me, even though you were reading it in English.

**AV**

So Aminatta, as we round the corner here, every season of the podcast has a different signature question. And this season's signature question is about what is on your desk? So other than your actual writing tools, what do you need on your desk to feel like you are ready to write?

**AF**

Not very much, actually. But there's one thing, but it's not on my desk. I've got one thing here I can share with you that's on my desk. And it's a piece of obsidian.

**AV**

Oh, a piece of obsidian. And yeah, and for our listeners, it's a small rock. If you play in Minecraft, maybe you know what Aminatta is talking about.

**AF**

Obsidian, it is the densest, sharpest, I don't know, rock mineral on earth. I picked it up, this particular piece I picked up in Kenya, but I've got another piece from Ethiopia. And I'm actually working on a book about the Great African Rift Valley at the moment. And obsidian plays this crucial role in toolmaking and in the rise of Homo sapiens. So I have a piece of obsidian, but that's, sometimes I have these little talismans for whichever book I'm working on. But the only thing I really need to write is number one, silence, and number two, a dog. So she doesn't actually sit on my desk, she sits, she's not here now for the purpose of the recording, because sometimes she gets up and interrupts.

**AV**

We would have appreciated her voice.

**AF**

Normally she's in the bed in the corner. And so I can love her little cot—you know, someone once called, unsaid writer who and I can't remember who it is, but called dogs the silent companion, you know, the sort of perfect companion for the writer. And they'll, you know, relax there for a couple of hours. And then after about two or three hours, they'll stand up, come over, have a stretch, tell you it's time to walk about a bit, make a cup of tea, and then get back to it. So yeah, dog. And for this one, a piece of obsidian.

**AV**

That's a great answer. And I can't think, I now need to go out and get obsidian, and I need to also get a dog.

So, Nicole, Aminatta, thank you again for this lovely dialogue. And as we approach the end of another Novel Dialogue, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, public books for its partnership, and acknowledged support from Duke University. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern and designer, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Episodes this season include conversations with Ocean Vuong, Joshua Cohen, Erika Wurth, and others. So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue, thanks for listening. If you like what you heard, please subscribe.