

Seattle Arts & Lectures
Interview Transcript: Bitaniya Giday, Seattle Youth Poet Laureate
Interviewer: Gabriela Denise Frank
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Note: this transcript has been edited for clarity and flow.

Gabriela Denise Frank

I'm Gabriela Denise Frank, and I'm here on behalf of Seattle Arts & Lectures with Bitaniya Giday, the 2020/2021 Seattle Youth Poet Laureate. I want to start by saying thank you, Bitaniya, for being here with me on this summer afternoon and taking time with me.

Bitaniya Giday

I'm absolutely glad to be here.

GDF

Why don't we start with you talking a little bit about yourself and how you got started as a writer and as a poet?

BG

I think that I've always been a writer. My earliest memory of writing was fourth grade, really working with expository writing. That's the first kind of experience that you got in my school district, at least, with writing essays and being creative. It's storytelling. And I just had a lot of things pent up in me just because English is my second language. I immigrated here from Ethiopia. And so I spent a lot of time really struggling with learning a new language.

During that time, I had a lot of thoughts in my head that I wished I could express and didn't know how to do it. But once I really got the hang with writing and speaking in English, I just had so much to say and I really couldn't stop. But in terms of poetry, I started in eighth grade and MLK Assembly, that I had co-organized, and that's when I discovered slam poetry and decided I wanted to do my first piece there. And from then, I went into Seattle, discovered the [Youth Speaks Seattle](#) community—shout out to them—performing, and that's really how it took off.

GDF

I have to say, I was really touched by the poem that was the opening for a recent Seattle Arts & Lectures event that you read called *Hyphenated Identity Crisis*. There's so much packed into that poem exploring ideas of belonging, of outsidership. Do you feel comfortable sharing how that poem started and how it evolved?

BG

Yeah. When I got the idea of the poem, it followed after a group piece that I did with a fellow writer, amazing, amazing writer. Her name is Ryan Clifton. She talks about being Palestinian and Muslim and queer and her identity around those things. We created a piece called *Wheel of Fortune*, talking about the U.S.'s involvement in global politics and war, and how rough and ugly it can be.

The piece was focused on Middle Eastern politics. I sat with it afterwards, thinking about my own place of birth in Ethiopia and how the U.S.'s intervention also caused, and prolonged, a lot of the civil war and tribal conflicts we have there. I realized that piece was just as relevant in my country as it was in Palestine or Yemen, or Saudi Arabia or Iran or Iraq, how important it was for me to start talking about it and bringing visibility towards it.

That's when I really started to kind of grapple with the idea of me being Ethiopian, but also me being American and my own culpability [in] those issues and why my voice is so necessary in speaking out against [them], but also understanding the privilege that I have being in America and not experiencing conflict and what war can bring into your community. And so that was the thought around the piece. And, really, I finished that piece in just a day. I started writing in the morning and was done by afternoon, edited, completed, and it was just—it came all spewing out of me because I had it pent up in me for so long.

GDF

Is this something that you talk about at home or do you feel, as a young person, you're able to express [it] in ways that women who are in your family, who might be of a different generation, can't express in the same way?

BG

Actually, my expressiveness in politics comes from the women in my family. They are super loud and vocal. I think, also, just a lot of my understanding around immigration came from the stories of my mother's and my aunt's and my grandparents' because, ultimately, they were the ones who made the trip out. I am first-gen—I was born in Ethiopia, but I don't recall a lot of what the transition was like other than, like, obviously, speaking English and trying to get myself in the education system and figure things out there.

But they're the ones who crossed the Sahara Desert, you know, who fled to Saudi Arabia then made their trip here. My family is spread all across the globe, from Sweden to London, Germany, everywhere. Most of those people who were telling the stories and are vocal about it are the women in my family. They're the ones who've expressed it and talked with me around these issues so that I could write about them and really understand. That's why a lot of my poetry, even though it's not quite out there on SAL, is about women and womanhood, through immigration and through blackness and how we navigate those relationships.

GDF

There's a lot of legacy in your work, then there's this continuum of women. Have you been back to the place where you were born? Or have you been to these other places where you have family to see them?

BG

Well, I went to Ethiopia the summer before my freshman year of high school. I'm currently a rising senior. So that was a long time ago. Um, yeah, so I was there. I visit—the ones that are in the U.S., in terms of extended family, I visit quite often. There's a big Ethiopian community in Texas, so I go there quite often to meet with family. But, yeah, that experience is super, super wild. We're one of the only, like, groups of family that live in Seattle. So, I didn't grow up with a lot of cultural, Ethiopian stuff in terms of holidays, cultural wear. Things like that were just something that's not familiar to me, so going back to Ethiopia, I was kind of bombarded with that—and not realizing that was a big part of my culture. It's the same thing in Dallas where, you know, people are always over at your house, you're always drinking coffee. You're always celebrating, you're always dancing. That was not something we experienced in our household because we were alone. And we *are* alone.

GDF

I was curious about the line [in your poem] where you say, “And I finally am no longer a hyphenated identity crisis.” As a reader, what I'm hearing is, there's a moment when something shifted or changed, when that crisis became something else?

BG

That's a really good question, actually. Because, I think, prior to me trying to understand what my relationship with Ethiopia was, I'm still also trying to figure out what it means to be African American and, like, how I can be both things at once almost. When I'm with the African American community here, I feel like I belong in that space. But also, when I'm in an Ethiopian American community, maybe I don't feel that sense of belonging, but I still feel like it's my place to be in those spaces.

I think that line signals me understanding that identity has so much duality in it and so much intersectionality and that, sometimes, they're conflicting. That you're always at war with yourself, but fighting it or choosing is not productive. Sometimes you accept we're complicated humans and have complicated intersections within us, and just to accept it and to explore it, to understand yourself and be okay with it. But also to continuously push yourself to make sure that every part of you has visibility has its own story and that you're honoring it. So I think that was kind of the understanding that I was getting towards the end of the poem, that acceptance of how complicated [people] are.

GDF

Right. Yeah, I think in some ways, as humans, we're drawn to binaries because we can understand, you know, belonging/outsider—it's this or that. But when you think about the

different slices of what home could be, sometimes it can be a physical place, oftentimes, it's a mental space or a feeling.

Do you find multiple pockets of home as you're traveling throughout the world, or even within Seattle?

BG

I mean, absolutely. I also think with finding different homes you find different versions of yourself that you're really comfortable with, and that you didn't know you had within you. I think that, again, that's the amazing thing about poetry. There's so many different spaces in which poetry exists and communities within poetry are just occupying space and doing work and pushing it out. Like I said, slam and written poetry are two very different things. So, being a part of the YPL [Youth Poet Laureate] cohort is a very different experience than being on a slam team and being very competitive and writing pieces that are for a stage versus something that is meant to be read on in a book or on paper. [It's] understanding we all are different writers in different places. And we all are different people in different homes that we find. Yeah.

GDF

Let's talk a little bit about this year ahead. Do you have a sense, as Youth Poet Laureate, and especially with the shifting environment we're in, what do you imagine that this coming year is going to look like?

BG

In terms of the cohort as a whole, I think we're having a lot of conversation and dialogue around what we want to see this year, and what has been done in the past and what we want to continue. I think the first thing is just writing as a group of people, as a group of leaders in the work that we do, just understanding our voices. We're very experimental around, like, getting used to each other right now.

I also think that there's a lot of amazing activists and organizers within our cohort, and trying to understand what it looks like to mobilize through poetry, how to use our poetry to bring healing, to bring community, to bring liberation, to bring resistance, all that, and understanding what's the best way of doing that right now, which is something that would have looked different if we had this discussion a couple months ago, pre-pandemic. I also think the virtual space is just as powerful and even more accessible to people. I think we're trying to understand what the best way of bringing our work into a virtual space—can it be a night that there are a lot of readings happening and a lot of new work that's getting written? I think we're stocking up on that and are going to release that work soon.

GDF

I can say, surely of myself and most everyone I know, that people are very hungry for connection. And the fact that people are thinking about digital events differently because we

have to, there is this audience of people looking for inspiration, connection and feeling. I think it'll be exciting to see what you all do.

You're also a Youth Ambassador—is that correct?—for the Gates Discovery Center? Is that work continuing as well? It seems like there's a lot of crossover of community and activism in you and your work.

BG

Yeah, no, that's beautiful. So currently, for the Gates Foundation, we're launching the workshops for the summer. And this is, like, the Teen Action Fair workshops where we bring some youth within the community to understand how to push in their organizing work in Seattle, which is going on, but also we're launching a virtual space where we're going to do performances but also conversations around other organizers in relation to the BLM [Black Lives Matter] Movement here in Seattle, which is taking place.

But, yeah, so much of the work here in Seattle, especially the youth spaces are all interconnected. I think that's one of the best things about Seattle is that we find spaces to gather and to be in community and to make sure that people have a network of support. I'm also thinking about how much work that needs to be done outside of the virtual space and how much mutual aid efforts are going on, and how much youth are part of that movement. We have organizations like student art spaces [and the] Black and Brown Minds Matter Movement that are on the streets, providing food and access to people, and these are youth doing it. Youth are active in this city, and it's amazing to see. It's amazing to be a part of it.

GDF

That's wonderful. What was the reason that you applied for YPL?

BG

In Youth Speaks there's kind of a legacy of YPLers. Azura Tyabji, who was the Youth Poet Laureate a couple years ago, is one of my closest friends and mentors. Last year, one of my other friends here from Youth Speaks Seattle also applied to as part of the cohort last year. In a way, it's kind of tradition for us to apply and take up that space. So that was part of the reason, just having a mentor [say], you know, I believe in you and, like, I think that you could occupy that space super well. And, so, that was part of the reason.

The other reason is just, you know, a book deal is really hard to find. It really is. I really wanted to write for a book. I've had an idea of a book, and, like I said, a lot of our conversations in my family are through women and there's so many intersections between immigration and blackness that I've always wanted to thematically put into a book of poems. Having that opportunity was super important to me, so that was the biggest reason why I applied, to have that opportunity to put a book together.

GDF

How do you imagine that the experience is going to change you?

BG

I think the number one thing is, I need to become a better writer on the page. I think I'm a really good performer, and I really want to develop my style and structure of a poem, because it looks very different. We were talking about how water moves on a page and how we look at that—but also how we can communicate things without words, but the way that things are placed and what symbols we're using.

One of my favorite all-time poets is Danez Smith, so I look to their poems to kind of—not replicate it—but to draw inspiration from and [see] how I can use poetry to communicate things to people without being super direct about it. Because, in slam, with a lot of things, like tone, like your face, the way that your body is, the art is very direct, and I think on paper, it's super multifaceted, and I want to do *that* work. I want to grow in that way.

GDF

Are there particular poets or, maybe even outside of poetry, what are the things or people or places that inspire you as a writer?

BG

Oh, that's a good question. It's—the spectrum is so broad. I feel like the number one thing is I draw inspiration from music, like, Solange is someone that I really connect to. I listen to her a lot when I write. There's a lot of local artists, like Nikkita Oliver. I read Nikkita's book of poems and just understanding how to be local with your activism and with your poetry. She really helps me understand my place in that. But if we're talking broader, I think powerful women in our time like Angela Davis is amazing, bell hooks, Cornelius. All of those Black philosophers are super important to me.

When I read, I read like a lot of liberation texts and that also helps my writing, like [Frantz] Fanon. Just that kind of reading where it's super optimistic and resilient and gives power back to the people. That feeling you have power and you have control over your body and your story helps me bring that kind of autonomy into my writing, so that people can really feel it, feeling the independence and feeling that there's a story being communicated to them.

GDF

What you're saying reminds me of that essay by Audrey Lorde, *Poetry is not a Luxury*—do you know this one? It's something a local poet said—she's, like, why don't we open every single class by reading *that*? She's right; we should. I think there's something to that, where there's a sense of story that's so essential. It's, like, it's not just entertainment. It's essential to life.

Do you talk about poetry with your parents at home? Or your family?

BG

That's interesting. I feel like I talk about the politics behind my poems or, communicating the messaging around my poems. I perform to my sister, always, first and I always introduce the pieces to my family before it goes anywhere. My mom is super big, like my number one critic. She will tell me honestly, is it good, is it bad, does it need this or that. So, yeah, poetry is a very big part of my identity. It's also quite visible in my household. People can hear me yelling into my room as I do pieces.

GDF

It's great that you have that sounding board at home. I mean, the test audiences, that's wonderful. And that they'll give you legitimate feedback and critique.

BG

They're too honest, sometimes, but...

GDF

What would you say either to a younger version of yourself or a young poet who's looking for role models and for a little bit of advice? Anything you've learned?

BG

Yeah, I think the conversation around *Hyphenated Identity Crisis* is something that took a long time for me to understand. That, like, really finding comfort in labels. It's not something to strive for and to put all your time and energy to because we are fluid as beings. And, when you find that label that you think encompasses you as a human being, you outgrow it really quickly, to just accepting yourself. I think acceptance is a really, really big thing—but not in the way of, like, accepting that what is will always be, but that you are capable of more and that you are also capable who you are right now. Accepting that and giving yourself a break and enjoying everything that is happening because life goes by really, really quick. And time goes by really, really quick. So, savoring those moments is super, super important. Yeah.

GDF

Are you getting to do reading and writing this summer? It sounds like you are very busy. A lot going on?

BG

I'm also part of the [Brave New Voices Festival](#) slam team this year, which means that—I don't know if you've ever heard of BMV?—it's this international poetry festival. Ages thirteen to nineteen can go and compete in it. Pretty much whoever places top three is top three in the world. Last year, I was also on the team which got third in the world, which—

GDF

Congratulations!

BG

It was super, super amazing. This year, we're doing a lot of writing in group pieces and individual poems for that festival, which is coming up in two weeks. A lot of our pieces are centered here in Seattle and what's been going on. I've been doing a lot of politically relevant work in my writing, which is also super, super good. I think one thing I need to work on is writing for myself and just writing to heal and writing to enjoy the work that I do, rather than always producing something for the sake of producing something and accomplishing something.

GDF

I find that very common, I would say culture-wide, but especially with young people. There is such a focus on—everything is training for, you know, adulthood—and I wonder: do you feel like, as a young person, you have downtime? Do you feel like it's accessible and that you can actually take it?

BG

If I'm being honest, I can't remember the last time I even read a book just to enjoy reading the book. I always felt like when I'm reading [a] book, it's because there is knowledge there and there's something that I need from the book. I've never—I don't know. It's just been it's been a long time since I've just read to read. Right? Yeah, there isn't a lot of downtime. I feel like, just with being a rising senior, applying to college, but also, I'm an intern at the International Rescue Committee, tutoring refugee children. So whatever space and time I had, I scheduled off doing tutoring sessions with different families. So, no, I think sometimes when I see emptiness in my schedule I'm, like, *that* needs to get filled as soon as possible so that I sign myself up for more. I say yes to opportunities, so that I have fulfillment, but it is draining. But, also, the work is important, I think. I feel like I'll have a lot of time in the future to really relish in what I've accomplished and the work that I've done but, right now, I think that it's important that I'm active and that, since I'm an able-bodied person, I'm giving back.

GDF

Do you have a sense of what school will be like in the fall?

BG

I have no idea. Well, actually, no, that's a lie. I'm part of the committee for our school for the re-entry programs, and so they're figuring it out. They're talking about hybrid programs versus like, 100% on-campus schooling. It's kind of a mess. I think that, whatever decisions that they make, they'll kind of be damned because, in terms of an equity lens, both the decisions that they have on their table are just not the best for folks in our community. But I think, again, the work will be

most important once we get to that place and then we figure out how to expand and make it more accessible than pre-planning for it because I think whatever will get pre-planned is subject to change anyways.

GDF

At this stage, you're going into your senior year. In terms of what you need—I mean, obviously there's the educational portion of it—but there's also the community. How much do you feel like you need IRL [in real life], like, *I need to see my friends face-to-face, my eyes on their eyes and my schoolmates in-person*? Is that something that can be sort of fluid, or are you really kind of missing it, not really having been together?

BG

I really enjoy doing classes online. I think taking it at your pace and having deadlines—to me—and then really going at it at whatever pace that you want to, it's super good for me, personally. I know that other people—like, again, tech access is an issue, having stable Wi-Fi, all of that—is super hard. But yeah, I don't feel like I need to see my friends. I also do organizing for our local organization here in Bellevue for Black Lives. It's called Eastside for Black Lives on Instagram and Facebook. When we reach the dates for a protest, I see a lot of them face-to-face. I have a feeling, throughout the summer when we do food drives, supply drives, I will see them. We do a lot of Zoom calls as well, day and night, so I'm seeing them a lot. I think that's not going to go away. So, yeah, and I'm also super detached from the high school experience in general, so I think there are definitely other people who are missing it more than I do. A lot of my friends come from different high schools and I see them in these settings normally as well. So it's not much of a change for me, and I enjoy it. But again, it's very different for different people.

GDF

What do you do to feed yourself or nurture [yourself]?

BG

That's also a good question. I drink lots of tea. I really like tea. I listen to a lot of music. I like doing photoshoots and conceptual visual art. Not like drawing and painting but, like, taking blocks and putting it together. I try to find space and time where I can just be creative and just be with myself and just enjoy the space that I'm in. I also really like dancing in my mirror. Just for an hour, at least a day to just diffuse and feel good. I find really small, impromptu ways to just feel good for the day.

GDF

Where do you see poetry taking you? Is that something you would focus on as an area of study in college? Or are there other things that are taking a certain place in your life, a central focus?

BG

I think that's something that's really evolving right now, just trying to understand poetry's place. There's a lot of people I look up to, that do poetry and are ambassadors for really amazing organizations and that go to different events and do poetry as a way of storytelling for different organizations, like [Rwanda Girls Initiative](#), they're ambassadors for that. There was another one that I can't quite remember that another poet is part of. I also look up to people like [Mahogany Browne](#), who is this amazing, amazing, Black woman poet who lives in Harlem, New York, I believe, or the Bronx, I'm not quite sure. She centers her career around poetry, whether that is judging slams, writing books, editing, writing movie scripts—all that stuff. So there definitely is a space.

I've always been on that traditional path of going to college, going into pre-law, and then finding poetry as something that can fit along the way. Because, again, I think it'll come naturally. I want to study immigration law and women's rights, and things like that. I think with that approach, you will just always have a space because it's a way of telling my own story, but also the people around, being in a super unique way.

GDF

I think there's something interesting that happens when you take writing and you cross it with something else—the kind of creative tension that happens in that place where something else is feeding you and your writing and the way you think about family in the world and belonging. All of that, I think that's where interesting things start to happen, when you're adding a different perspective.

What are some things that you're excited about or feeling hopeful about in this time of uncertainty?

BG

The number one thing is, I can't wait to get on that virtual BNV Festival and see all the other states. I'm excited to see Trinidad perform. They're super, super, super good. And all the new pieces that people are fostering and producing and are going to showcase at the festival. I'm super, super excited with organizers in Seattle in the events that they've been throwing. I had a really fun, Fourth of July and I think people are starting to understand that resiliency and joy is also part of resistance. It's always kind of draining to be protesting and marching like twenty-four-seven that it can be something where, yeah, our joy is resistance as well. I think that there are a lot of things. There are a lot of events. Being outside and community is really nourishing me and keeping me going right now.

GDF

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about or leave people with if they're listening to this interview?

Bitaniya Giday

That's a good question. I think that the general things that are important are making sure you're active in your community, realizing things around police brutality and Black Lives Matter, how local it is, and how impactful it is in our community. I think one of the biggest things that I struggle with is just understanding the long and deep history of gentrification Seattle, especially with the Black community—like, Capitol Hill a decade ago did not look the way that it looks right now. It wasn't bars and coffee shops—no—Black folks were living in those communities.

I think that [Wa Na Wari](#), which is the last Black-owned house here in Seattle, and the fact that it has taken us to this point to realize the slow and systematic erasure of Black community and Black culture that the city is taking over, is super, super saddening. So, understanding your place in that. Pay your rent, too, to our Duwamish and Salish Coast people. They have resources online for that as well. And, just, be active in everything that you're doing. Be intentional, and don't be afraid to learn something new or to be wrong, to really just embrace it and be better for it.

GDF

I think that's great advice. I think sometimes people are afraid that—people do nothing because they're afraid of making a mistake—not realizing that actually making a mistake might lead to the kind of conversation that turns you into an activist.

I look forward to following your work this year. I am excited about you and the YPL cohort. And I just followed you on Instagram so I can be sure to stay in tune with what's going on.

BG

I'll go check that and follow you back right now!

GDF

Thank you for all of your work within the community, I mean, on top of all these other things that you're doing. Your commitment to poetry, your commitment to Seattle, your commitment to Black women, to feeding people, to connecting people in the community—your work is really amazing. Thank you for taking the time to do it.

BG

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me as well.