

# SAL/on air: Imbolo Mbue

## Imbolo Mbue 00:08

"We are not curious enough about each other to do the hard work of finding out who we are. We are not curious enough to ask questions, to question the things we've heard, the stories we've been told. We prefer to cling to our identities and say I'm an X, so I don't do Y. We stick to our kind because it's safe. But how far will that take us? Look at what it's doing to us, how afraid it is making us, how much it's depriving us of life-transforming experiences. In the absence of curiosity, what are we left with? Fear and a determination to destroy that which we are afraid of."

## Rebecca Hoogs 00:48

Many of us live in some kind of in-between. Even now as the pandemic starts to ease. We live in between the before and the after, the in-between of not knowing when or how it will end. And when it does end, what will our lives look like in the new world? "I live in a space between," Imbolo Mbue says in this talk. "It is the immigrants burden to live with a body in one place, and the heart in another." I'm Rebecca Hoogs, the Interim Executive Director of Seattle Arts & Lectures, you're listening to *SAL/on air*, a collection of talks from the world's best writers from over 30 years of Seattle Arts & Lectures. In this episode, recorded on June 7 2019, at Town Hall Seattle, Imbolo Mbue describes how her in-between began in Cameroon, where she was born, and continued in New York, where she traveled to attend college. She stayed, attended Business School, got a job in New York City and then in 2008, she lost her job in the Great Recession. She saw during this time, the great economic stratification of New York and the seed for her book, *Behold The Dreamers*, was born. The book went on to be a *New York Times* bestseller and an Oprah's Book Club pick.

## Rebecca Hoogs 02:10

The book asks the questions we all inherently struggle with. What is happiness? And what makes a good life? What would we be willing to do or to give up for ourselves, for family, for love, and for dreams? Imbolo's compelling characters defy easy answers. At its core, this book is a love song for dreams and for dreamers. In the talk, she also touches on the book she was working on then, in which was published this winter, *How Beautiful We Were*. We are lucky for the space that Imbolo Mbue's words made in the air that night. And for the space her words continue to make in the world today. This is *SAL/on air*.

## Imbolo Mbue 03:06

Thank you. I love when I get to go after a musician and a poet. I feel the pressure to sing or to sing for him. I'm not good at either, but I am so delighted to be here. This is my first time speaking in Seattle. When I got this invitation, I was very excited. I always wanted to live in Seattle. When I first came to America, I spent a lot of time watching *Sleepless in Seattle*. And I thought I was going to meet a guy who looks like Tom Hanks and get married and move here. It didn't work out. My husband doesn't look like Tom Hanks. But I am just very happy to be here. So before I came to America, and I had fantasies of marrying Tom Hanks, I grew up in a town in Cameroon called Limbe, which I'll tell you more about

later. But just a few months before I came to America, something happened, and I'd like to tell you a story of what happened to me. Specifically, this happened to me on the day I graduated from high school. My high school was a private, all-girls boarding school. It was one of the best high schools in my country. Many of the girls who came from there, they came from very wealthy families, unlike me, my mother wasn't wealthy. She was far from wealthy. I only went to this high school because I had relatives who helped sponsor me to go to this school. But that never bothered me, and I worked hard in school and I had outstanding grades. So at our graduation ceremony, which is the case in a lot of traditional ceremonies, awards are given to students with the best performances. There was one particular award that was very special. It was a trophy given to a student who had excelled in a certain combination of subjects. And I was one of the few students in my class who was eligible for that particular trophy. So I knew I was in contention for that award. So before graduation day, a couple of my classmates said to me, Imbolo, we think you're gonna win this award, because you know, there's only a handful of girls who are eligible, and you have one of the best grades in class. So we think you're going to win this award. And I am, I'm not a competitive person by nature. And I didn't let talk of the award get to me.

**Imbolo Mbue 05:36**

Just before I continue, I just want to acknowledge Reggie and Omar because I was listening to them in the back. Thank you for that music. Reggie. And thank you, Omar. I just wanted to say that.

**Imbolo Mbue 05:50**

So back to my award, which—everybody was saying, Imbolo, we think you're going to win this award because you're very smart. And you're eligible for it. So graduation came and when the winner for the award was announced it wasn't me. The trophy went to another student who also met the criteria. Very intelligent young lady, a classmate who I always admired. So I clap, and I smiled, and she went to the podium and she collected her award. And after the ceremony, I won another award. So I took the award I won, and I went and I celebrated with my family. So later that day, after the festivities were over, and my classmates and now we're back in our dormitories and all the classmates are coming to me. And they said, Imbolo, you were cheated. That award was yours too, and everybody knows it. The only reason the other student won it is because her family is wealthy, and yours isn't. That's just the way the world works.

So I listened to them. And I made no comment. And in the silence, I realized something. I realized that I needed to decide what story to believe. That not to win an award because my mother was not wealthy or because the trophy was not mine to win. The choice on what to believe was entirely mine. What others believed was completely immaterial. I could believe whatever I chose to believe, and what I chose to believe that day was that my classmate and I were both worthy of that trophy and she won it. End of story. My classmate had excellent grades, and she was an exemplary student just like me. If the only thing that separated us was how much money our families had, so be it. I refuse to let the experience change our highly regarded classmates. So recently, I was in my hometown last year. And that classmate of mine invited me over for dinner to her house. It was my first time seeing her since high school, and she'd gone into a lovely and most generous woman, as pretty as when we were teenagers, which is not an easy thing to pull off.

**Imbolo Mbue 08:06**

I thought about that graduation episode, and I realized what the loss would have been for me, if I chosen to believe the story the other girls were telling me. Not only would have gone along with bad feelings, I would have grown up to believe that certain things will not happen to me in life because I wasn't born into money. And I haven't found that to be the truth. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about that episode in my life and the power stories have over me. My classmates told me a believable story, and I refuse to believe it. Why? Why do we believe certain stories are not believed by others? Do our beliefs and interpretations have anything to do with the story? Of course not. Our beliefs and interpretations of the story has nothing to do with the story and everything to do with us. It has to do with who we think we are, what identities we choose to hold on to. We can't claim we believe certain stories because we heard it from a reliable source. Even the best of parents have told their children about these stories that ended up not to be true. Even the most reputable media outlets have given us false stories. We can't say we believe it because it seems so factual. It doesn't take much for fact to be exposed as fiction and vice versa these days. I recently watched a documentary that claimed a deceased popstar was a pedophile. I believed every single word the victim said. Why? Because I identify with voiceless children. What if I would I have believed if I had been a victim of false public accusations?

On my high school graduation day, I identified as a person with potential, and when my classmates told me a story that suggested my potential meant nothing by itself, I refused to believe it. Identity is a beautiful thing and a dangerous thing. Beautiful because identity gives us a sense of belonging, which is as human beings we need. That identity is also a very dangerous thing. Because one identity is all it takes the shape a person's life, for better or for worse. One identity is all it takes to alter our interpretation of history. One identity is all it takes for a colorful world to become black and white. And let's not deceive ourselves that it's safe to identify as X but not as Y.

An identity is an identity and potentially costly. You only need to turn on the news to see what devastations they've brought to the world. The strange thing about an identity though, is that we don't always make a conscious decision about what to take on. Often we inherit our identities from our families, or we pick it up somewhere in our communities. Or there are times the world takes it upon itself to tell us who we are. The world tells us a story. And we accept it. The story I was told about myself when I came to America was that I am an immigrant, which is actually true. I came from another country into this one. But the thing is that that story never felt real to me.

I never walked around with a strong immigrant identity until the day I wrote a story that was in part about the struggles of an immigrant family. And I had to answer many interview questions that began with so Imbolo, as an immigrant, what do you think of Donald Trump? And then, I started giving responses like well, as an immigrant, I have no comment. Actually, I never said. [Audience laughs.] I have a lot of comments. Despite all the interviews I did, I never mentioned to any interviewer that while I might be an immigrant, I identify more as an emigrant, which is somebody who leaves his or her own homeland. One of my favorite novels of last year was called *Small Country* by a French writer named Gael Faye, which was originally published in France. In it, the narrator is looking back on his boy who had before Burundi fell into a genocide, forcing him and his family to flee to France. Watching the news one day, he remarks as he sees migrants in makeshift boats washing up on European soil.

Public opinion holds that they fled hell to El Dorado. Bullshit. What about the country inside them? No one ever mentioned that. So I'd like to tell you about the country inside me and what happened after I left it.

### **Imbolo Mbue 12:56**

I was born in the southwest region of Cameroon, which is one of two English-speaking regions in a mostly French-speaking country. If you've read about Cameroon in the news lately, it probably has to do with the violence that has engulfed the English speaking regions ever since. A separatist movement sprung up to create a new country for the English speakers because the English speakers feel very marginalized. And the predominantly French-speaking government sent their soldiers. And for the past couple of years, villages have been burned, places in which has been my childhood I've been deserted. Thousands are now refugees. There's no saying when peace will return.

But in my childhood, Cameroon was an emblem of peace in Africa. I spend most of my life in a town called Limbe, which is my hometown. I loved Limbe a lot and still do. On school days, I walked with my friends for about an hour to attend a public secondary school. After high school, my relatives sponsored me to come to America to go to college. And I arrived here about 20 years ago, in 1998. Within hours of my arrival, the person I was traveling with suggested we go to a famous American restaurant and have something called a burger. I'd heard of this thing called a burger, but never tasted one. So I was excited to drive to the restaurant. And then we got to McDonald's. And I learned that there isn't just one kind of burger. There are about 20 different kinds of burgers. So I'm looking at the menu and decide between a Big Mac and a double cheeseburger and a quarter pounder and a double quarter pounder with cheese. And not being accustomed to many choices because in my hometown, we had one of everything. If you want to drink milk, the whole town drinks one brand of milk. Not being used to having to make a decision, I said, you know what, I'm not gonna have a burger anymore. So I looked at the menu, and I saw something called chicken nuggets. And I got a bit confused because I didn't know chickens have a thing called nugget. I said, I don't care, I'm gonna try this chicken nuggets thing, whatever part it is. So I did and I loved it. And for many years McDonald's chicken nuggets had a very special place in my heart because it was my welcome to America moment. So after having my chicken nuggets, I took a plane that evening to continue to Chicago where I was to live with relatives until I started college.

### **Imbolo Mbue 15:33**

It was during my stay in Chicago that my homesickness began. A deep unremitting longing to go back home. I wanted nothing more than to go back to my hometown of Limbe to see my mother, be with my friends, work on the open air market in my hometown, stroll up and down the streets filled with familiar faces. I like to say that the Chicago weather, on a warm seaside town for a cool city will make anybody want to flee. But it was more than the weather. It was many other things, including the reality of America, so unlike the America of my imagination.

The America I encountered in those first days was nothing like what I'd seen on television in Cameroon. The people I met did not live like the characters on The Cosby Show. They did not drive cars like the guys on Beverly Hills 90210. They didn't have the kind of work as seen on soap operas like Dallas and Dynasty. I'd imagine before arriving at that somehow I would seamlessly slide into a new life. America will be like Cameroon to me, my home. But I have a lot more money of course, because of the promise

of America. Instead, I had to deal with the fact that many immigrants I met seemed defeated and tired. The broader country did not appear to be much better. My friends and I laugh when we talk about it. Why didn't we hear about this other America before coming here, we ask ourselves. We blame the media. We say they show a sanitized version of America. Whatever happened to honesty? In blaming the media do we forget that Cameroon TV viewers, just like TV viewers the world over, are humans and as humans we prefer beautiful stories that come with endings with bows nicely tied at the top.

### **Imbolo Mbue 17:30**

The American media gave us what we sought. And why shouldn't they? Do we really want to hear about Americans left with big medical bills or of innocent men stuck in solitary confinement? Do we want to watch TV shows about children going to sleep hungry in the world's richest country on earth? Did we want to listen to testimonies of industrious men and women who worked from sunrise to sunset yet remain in debt? No. Cameroon had enough of his own troubles.

We never needed to believe that there was something better out there. The glorious America, the idea of America, gave us hope. Only when I arrived here I did I learned there was something called racism. Only then did I learn of the civil rights movement. Funny though, I knew a great deal about Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations. But I never heard about the plight of Native Americans. Only after I arrived here did I hear about people being described as homeless, a phenomenon which was almost non-existent in my hometown. During those moments of acute homesickness, I forgot all about the shortcomings of my hometown, particularly the over classism that always bothered me even as a child, I forgot that I left my hometown because the opportunities there were few and reserved for those connected to the powerful.

Dreams and their achievement at the center of my novel, *Behold the Dreamers*. But having dreams and high aspirations was never a part of my culture growing up, largely because of the scarcity of opportunities. Without opportunities, my work means dreams will not be attained. What we had in Limbe, in the absence of dreams was a sense of contentment. If you couldn't change your circumstances, you found peace with it and celebrated life for what it is. That contentment, of course, is not an American ideal. Oh, I just want to be content, said no American I ever met. There's an obsession with happiness in this country. I mean, all of how desperately people pursue happiness in this country. How much decisions are made, but based on what will make someone happy? Why should we as Americans be content when there's so much to be discontent about? I don't completely disagree with that way of thinking.

We have iPhones today; when we were content with cordless phones? Should we be content with a mediocre government? Of course not. This country became what it is today because of men and women who dreamed. While I would never call myself a dreamer, I'll admit that hearing Americans talking about dreams, dreaming big and going after dreams and having never given up on dreams, opened my eyes when I came here to a whole new way of living, one of the many blessings that this country has given me. And yet, fascinated as I was by the dream culture I was living in, I could also see up close the price of high ambitions, and the long hours of work involved, the broken families. I read about diseases caused by stress. It made me realize what an unappreciated gift contentment is, and how special our lives were in Limbe, even in the absence of modern amenities. As a young child, I lived

in villages when my mother, when my mother worked as a community development assistant. The houses in which we lived had no electricity or running water. But I don't remember ever wishing that our lives were different. I will say I had a very happy childhood. We were happy not because we pursued happiness. But because we recognized that happiness is a byproduct of freedom. We were free because we had the basics in life. Our house in Limbe had electricity, but no running water. That was part of the fun, going with my cousin or my friends to fetch water and chatting as we walked back home with our buckets of water on our heads. Even relatives and friends who live in what Americans will call hard, our lives were full because there was a great sense of community. People were happy because even though they didn't have much, they had the basics. The weather was beautiful, and we lived by the ocean.

**Imbolo Mbue 21:57**

When my novel first came out, one of the first reviews of it made mention of my childhood, and said I'd grown up in extreme poverty. And I said, yikes. I wish I hadn't read it, in keeping with my principle of not reading reviews, but a couple of my friends that read the reviews and loved it and they said I should read it. And it was a glowing review. But I had a very hard time getting over how my childhood was mischaracterized. I have no doubt the reviewers use of this term extreme poverty came from a positive place. I've met the reviewer, I'm a fan of his. And I knew he was simply trying to illustrate how far I'd come from being a small town African girl to an American novelist.

The reviewer was hardly the only American to make such an assumption. But the truth is that I did not know poverty until the day I came to this country. My toughest financial struggles came after I finished college. When I was in between jobs like a bank teller, dental office reception, and department store sales associate. At one point, I worked as a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesperson, which was as bad as it sounds. Back in those days, I had this ugly 1989 Honda Civic, which didn't have AC or anything. And I had to buy a fan and put on the dashboard. And then I drove with this vacuum cleaner along New Jersey and dad to carry up flights of stairs to sell it. And I go to people's houses. And now let me demonstrate to you how wonderful this vacuum cleaner is and then our vacuum the living room. And then they'd say, Oh, thank you, I'm not gonna buy it. And it was obviously a very, very, very hard time. What I learned during that period, of being very poor, what I learned about American poverty, is that it is a vicious thing. It is dehumanizing. It is undignified, it is relentless. It flattens you and flips you over and flattens you so more on the other side.

Poverty wasn't half as shameful in my hometown because we had other forms of wealth. A poor man could walk tall because he had a good wife and healthy children. But the American poverty I encountered had a way of depriving one of the ability of enjoying other forms of wealth. On top of that, one goes around with an awful sense of being a failure. Because you live in a country where you're surrounded by riches, and proclamations about how If only you could work harder, your life would be better. Well, I stopped selling vacuum cleaners at some point, my life did get better. I got my master's from Columbia with the help of a professor who got a scholarship for me. I got married, I had children. I became an American citizen. I became a novelist. I made my home in New York City, I got invited to speak at Seattle Arts & Lectures. Though not in that order. And it was no way as smooth as it sounds.

**Imbolo Mbue 25:13**

This past September was my 20th anniversary of living in the US. 20 years and I still don't believe I've will ever be able to lay claim to the country the same way as people were born here. I live in a space between and so does my writing. It is the immigrant's burden to have a body in one place and a hat in another place. An animal can only strut so proudly out of his natural habitat. As immigrants, we speak often of all what we left behind. Even the immigrants, who left dangerous situations, places they no longer wish to attend. They seek other countries within them just like I do. They stand on whatever foundation was laid for them there. Migration be it, immigrating entering a country or immigrating leaving a country, it is all consuming and transforming. There is no separate column to tabulate the losses and gains. They are all mixed together ever present a shadow at every turn. We lose a sense of total belonging, living in another country. And yet we gain opportunities of all of the wonders of our new country and yet we long for what only the old country can give us. Away in a distant land, those of us who cannot physically return home to visit do so in our spirits, because our sanity is demand it. No matter where we go, we carry our bed places with us. Never apart from all that it gave us and in providing for us. We seek its warm air on cold days. Imagine the sunshine when clouds cannot be subdued. We see long lost faces in a sea of strangers. We hear a voice I remember a story from a distant evening. Its love song breaks our heart. We remember the ones we once loved and lost in this chase after the wind. Some days we spent hours on YouTube watching video after video, music videos hits from back in the days. We try the old dance moves. We think of some party. Those were the days that was the most perfect time to be alive.

Why did we come here? is a question we often ask. Did you come here for work, for family, for a better life? What is a better life? That is the question a fellow immigrant recently asked me. He said his life in his country was far better than the life he has in America. The Why did you come here I asked him. To stay alive, he said. My life was in danger back home. I consider what he said. I came find education and a chance at career success. He came to stay alive. A friend of mine came after a bitter divorce to heal a broken heart. What were we all have in common? Freedom, of course. Freedom ultimately is what the American Dream promises. Freedom to pursue whatever it is that we want. And for us a quest for freedom is a quest for home, because home is freedom.

### **Imbolo Mbue 28:33**

When I began writing my novel in 2011, home was in the forefront of my mind. Cameroon was my homeland, New York City had adopted me and giving me the home I long sought. My inspiration for the novel was the Great Recession, in part because I was unemployed after having lost my job during the financial crisis. And because I was unemployed, I had a lot of time on my hands. I started writing the story about two families, one family of an immigrant chauffeur and the other family of a Lehman Brother's executive that he works for and how these two families were affected after Lehman Brothers collapsed in the Great Recession. My life had been affected by the financial crisis along with the lives of many people around me. So I wanted to explore how this fictional characters were also affected. But the wonderful thing about writing, or at least my kind of writing, is that instead of writing one thing, by the time you're done, I did something entirely different. I was setting while I was writing this novel, that it was very much about the fall of Lehman Brothers, and how we shaped the lives of the stories characters.

Even months before the book came out, I still thought that, that is until I had a meeting with my publisher and somebody said to me, so Imbolo, what would you say this story is about? And I give an answer and everybody there say oh, no, no, that's not what it's about. Though we will tell you what it's about because we are your publisher, and we know your book. So they told me, and after the novel came out, journalists and academics all told me, the book was merciless in his depiction of the American dream. When I went to France, I was congratulated by several journalists for writing a book that one prospective immigrant that America was not promised land. I have been told by readers that the story is about family, about marriage, about the American dream, about New York City, about choices, about failures about lies, about immigration, about home. The assertion that it's done is about home is perhaps the one that most took me by surprise, because I never set out to write about home. And yet characters are always thinking of the home they left behind. The way things were a dream of homes they hope to someday own and a wish to raise their children. A young man from a wealthy family leaves his home on a quest for true peace. In a scene that takes place just before Lehman Brothers collapses, the executive Clark Edwards sits with his chauffeur, Jende Junga by the Hudson River to watch the sunset. They talk about home and family and everything in between. Jende says a man can find a home anywhere, clad with a mediocre poem about home. The last word in the novel is "home?". I've been asked about that. Imbolo, the novel ends "home?", what does home mean to you? Where's your home these days? Are you finally at home in America.

#### **Imbolo Mbue 31:45**

New York City has given me the home a long dream to have fun in America. And in the process, he taught me a lot about home. It has pushed me to learn how to be at home anywhere, because my home is a faraway place, and a nearby place and a place around the corner. Some days is easy to arrive and settle in, other days I can barely see it covered in fog. There are stretches of time when I'm surrounded by strangers in the newest of places and yet I'm at home. From one day to the next, the distance between my home and the place where I stand fluctuates. It depends entirely on me how far or near my home is because home is a choice. In our accepting my evolution of the notion of home, I've also accepted that I no longer have the same sense of belonging to my hometown, like I used to when I was growing up. That occurred to us in my novel, we recognized that this immigrant life expands and contracts once in ways in unanticipated ways. The person who intends to come visit is 1000 miles removed from the person who left it. Life happened to me. America happened to me.

#### **Imbolo Mbue 32:57**

Last year, I went to my hometown for a visit. My cousin was the one to pick me up from the airport. And we were driving back home. I asked my cousin, "can you tell me how to get Wi-Fi?" And she said, "what is Wi-Fi?" And I said, "Come on is 2018! You know, Limbe is a small tribe in town. How can you not have Wi-Fi?" And she said, "We don't have it? Never heard of it. Sorry!" I said, "okay, I let it go". So a few minutes later, she said to me, "Wait, are you talking about connecting on a network to get internet?" I say, "Yeah!" She said, "Oh, you're so silly. It's not called Wi-Fi, it's called Wee-Fee". So she starts laughing at me laughing really hard. Later she tells everybody Imbolo say Wi-Fi, not Wee-Fee. What is Wi Fi, it is Wee-Fee learn how to say it right. On Alexa, I realized that Wee-Fee is a French word for Wi-Fi. And in my country being mostly French-speaking, the French words move around and so if you ever in France, please make sure to say Wee-Fee.

I didn't know my cousin and I were speaking two different languages. I was simply reminded of how much I no longer belonged in my own hometown the way I used to. I was different. I was not like them anymore. It took me back to when I first came to America my friends here will laugh at me the way I pronounce certain words. And then they'll spend so many minutes teaching me how to say the right way. And I'll say good luck with that, this accent is not going anywhere. People love to talk about assimilation. As if it's something you can go to a store and buy. Hey, why don't you put your old words in the trash and go to CVS and buy some new American ways.

### **Imbolo Mbue 34:53**

The politician Bobby Jindal, supposedly referred to immigration without assimilation as an invasion. This view, of course, comes from the notion that the marginalized have to adopt the ways of the dominant culture. Immigrants have to adopt the ways of native bonds, African Americans to as just black, gay should be able to be straight. The messages are try to be more like us because we are the norm. Come into our world, otherwise you might end up at a disadvantage. This Sunday, I was listening to Michelle Obama's memoir, where she talks about her time at Princeton, about how most of her friends were other black students. She talked about this idea that black students on college campuses shouldn't stick together. They should make more of an effort to be part of the main campus culture. She asks Why? Why should the burden of assimilation be on us? And I said, Amen to that. Why should we be the ones making most of the effort? Why can native bonds make more of an effort to come further into our world? I'm not talking about going to Thai or Indian restaurant, or doing yoga even though it's really good to be flexible. I'm talking about going into the temples of foginess, attending your first diverse learning on how to say hello in their language. Some of us pat ourselves on the back because we went on vacation to Vietnam and visited a village, or we traveled to Kenya and went into the slums. What about doing similar things in our own hometown?

But Imbolo, you might say, it makes no sense for us to venture into your world. You guys are the ones who come into our own country. Well, in that case, why don't we all adopt the costumes of Native Americans. If I'm saying all this, it is not because I've mastered the art of opening myself to other cultures very different for mine. I struggle very much here. I realize what a long way I still have to go and I never recognize that if I were to cling less to my identities, it will be so much easier for me. This all came into focus for me two years ago, when I was speaking in the lovely town of Savannah, Georgia. Because I was speaking there in February, and the weather was warm, two of my very close friends from college decided to come and spend the weekend with me. So after my talk, which was on a Saturday, my friends and I went out to dinner. And then we had a whole night to fill up with fun stuff. And my friends decided of all things that they wanted to go see a burlesque show. First of all, I barely even knew what that was. It just didn't sound like the kind of thing I do. The certain kind of things that I'm not into and a burlesque show sounds like one of them.

My friends couldn't care less about my liking, they wanted to see burlesque dancers. And since they travel to be with me, I grudgingly went to see the show. And I said, "Hmm, this is interesting". I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. And I looked for what to say to my husband and I say guess we want to see a burlesque show. So we left the burlesque show. One friend went to the hotel, and my other friend said, "it's only midnight. Let's do something else". I hadn't seen him in 10 years. I wanted to spend one-on-one time with him. So I said, "Okay, what do you suggest"? Let's go see a drag show at a gay club,

which sounded far more wholesome than a burlesque show. But I told my friend I was going to pass because again, it's not my thing. He begged and begged. My friend is a gay man. And at that time, he was going through a hard time trying to mend a broken heart. I could see in his eyes how badly he wanted to step away from his struggles and enjoy the drag show. So grudgingly, I went into the basement nightclub. I was so nervous. I was so afraid. I could barely even sit. I stood in a corner with my arms folded. And there were so many men in that place. Am I safe? I said to myself. My friend was somewhere flirting. The drag queens that are coming out singing and dancing. Wow, I thought look at their dresses. I wish I could do my makeup that good. This is so much fun. Before I knew it, I forgot I was in a gay bar. I was in awe of this drag culture and wanted to know everything about it.

### **Imbolo Mbue 39:30**

So why was I afraid to go in in the first place? I suppose I could claim that is because I don't like loud music, which is true. I could say because I don't drink alcohol. But the thing is that if someone has said to me, "Imbolo, there is a group of Africans, they having a loud dance party. Come with us. There'll be lots of alcohol". I would have gone in a second. I wouldn't have cared about how loud the music was because there are Africans, I still wouldn't have drank the alcohol. But I wouldn't have stood in a corner wondering if I was safe. The reason I was afraid of entering a burlesque club or going to see a drag show was because I did not know what goes on in places like that. And I was afraid of taking the risk and finding out.

### **Imbolo Mbue 40:21**

People say the problem with America is racism and classism and sexism, and a host of other "isms". What we don't talk about enough is that one of the root causes of all these "isms" is this shortage of curiosity. We are just not curious enough right now. We are not curious enough about each other to do the hard work of finding out who they are. We are not curious enough to ask questions, to question the things we've had the stories we've been told. We prefer to cling to our identities and say I'm an "X" so I don't know "Y". We stick to our kind because it's safe. But how far will this take us? Look at what it is doing to us. How afraid it is making us.

How much it is depriving us of life-transforming experiences. In the absence of curiosity, what are we left with? Fear and a determination to destroy that which we are afraid of? Lock them up we say to people who don't know. Take away the advice to choose. Ostracize them for being gay. Shame them for being overweight. Throw them in immigration detention. We did this to them for being poor, punish them for not being normal like the rest of us. We have become what a friend of mine calls a punishmentalist society. Because we don't take the time to hear histories so that we can show mercy. And what are we without mercy, except animals ripping each other apart?

Curiosity, though, should not be confused with useless inquiries. By which I mean asking questions of the other person just because you want to know. A couple of months ago, I was moderating a panel of immigrants in Kitsap county. And an audience member asked the panelists, what is your least favorite question to be asked by an American? The panel was in agreement of the question they most dislike, "where are you from?" On the surface is such a simple question. Tell me what country you're from. And yet what does panelists hear? What I often hear is, you are not from here. You're not one of us. Identify yourself. Who are you? And that happened to me just this past week. I was walking down the street in

Manhattan and a man comes up to me and he says, "Oh, the weather looks really nice today". And I said, "Yes". The moment I open my mouth, the topic change from the weather to where are you from? And it turns out he wanted more than talk about the weather, he wanted to know whether I was single or married or I wanted somebody to put a ring on it. He said, "Have a nice day". But the question of where are you from? I find is very deflating, and so did immigrants on this panel. But the question in the proper context, in a context where the questioner recognizes that they're talking to another human, that the human is more than an immigrant. It is a human who has a lot more to share besides a story of why they left their country. It is a wonderful question. It is a conversation many of us love to have. I love to talk about the beautiful country that is Cameroon. But being an immigrant so often strips you of that device to be recognized as more than a curiosity in another man's country.

**Imbolo Mbue 43:46**

Years ago, while I was working in a nonprofit in New York, one of my co-workers said to me, I've lived my whole life in my neighborhood. I was born here, went to school here, I got my GED here, I'm going to die here. I don't want to ever leave it. I was astounded. After many years of being a foreigner, and being surrounded by foreigners in my private life, I had forgotten that there are people who have never been foreigners, who never left in search of more. What is it like to have such a life to have never left home?

**Imbolo Mbue 44:20**

I asked myself that question again during my visit last year home as I was looking at my cousins or my friends. Imagine such a thing I said to myself. Imagine what it is like to never have had to struggle to be at home in another man's homeland. But how often do we spend time imagining the lives of others. The word empathy is a big one these days, the empathy can only truly do its job when identities step aside. So that all what remains is just a human being, a human being a human.

**Imbolo Mbue 44:52**

When my novel was published in 2016, Washington Post, in its review, called it the one Donald Trump should read. So I was asked often Imbolo, do you agree with that title? Why should we say Trump with your novel? It was a very tough question for me to answer? Does he read novels? Does he read any kind of books? I don't know that guy. I really don't know. What I'll say about Mr. Trump is that his rhetoric has pushed me to look at myself to consider my own identities. The week after he was reported to have insulted African countries calling them an explicitly dirty word, supposedly.

The week after that happened, I received a request from a national radio program to come on air to discuss if I as an African immigrant thought the President was racist. I thought about the invitation, ultimately asked my publicist to thank the program on my behalf and declined the invitation. Not long after that, I was asked by a white person if I thought Mr. Trump was a racist. My response was along the lines of Please don't ask me a such a question. It's not that I don't believe we should have a conversation about the topic. We need to hold our leaders accountable. And if they don't champion our shared values, we should condemn their words and actions.

I am the native of a country where we've had the same dictator for 36 years. And even as a child, I was deeply aware of what little freedom of speech we had. When I came to America and some people who

stand on the street and disagree in public with this president, I thought "oh"? So I did not take my right to speak out lightly. What concerns me about having conversations regarding Mr. Trump's divisiveness is that in spending so much time talking about him, we spend too little time talking about our own shortcomings. The ways in which our own identities are affecting how we treat other humans. What do we identify with? How does our identities shape our principles? What notions do we perpetuate in the way we live, the choices we make? So Mr. Trump is racist. But what about our own bigotry? So his sexism prejudice against immigrants and the disabled. But what about our own prejudices? Are we also blameless? And then not many among us who are benefiting from the very racist system that the likes of him are protecting? Why not talk about that? Why not talk about our own complicity in the coding systems where all people are not treated equally? The world is not going to get better if only other people stop doing this and start doing that. Things are not going to get better if others start behaving more like us.

How did we get to this moment in America? Because some people look at others and said, it is their fault. They're messing up our country. Let's elect somebody who is going to fix the problems that they're causing. Because we are blameless. I wish I was blameless. I know I'm not. And I'm convinced that change is only going to come when we all start considering the ways in which we are contributing to the brokenness of this country. It won't be a pretty process. Being brutally honest with ourselves is not a fun thing to do. But America needs it. This country is so worth fighting for. Thank you.

**Rebecca Hoogs 48:33**

We'll return for the rest of the event with Imbolo Mbue in just a moment. But first, we wanted to let you know that our new season is on sale now featuring events with Louise Erdrich, Daniel James Brown, Maggie Nelson, and many more. And also summer book bingo has begun. This free summer reading program for adults is a collaboration with the Seattle Public Library. And this year's board was illustrated by local artists, Tessa Hulls. Subscribe to our season and download your free summer book bingo board at lectures.org. And now more from Imbolo Mbue.

**Minita Gandhi 49:12**

So Imbolo, we're so excited to have you here. And you know, I don't know about all of you just by a show of hands. How many of you have had an opportunity to read *Behold the Dreamers* yet?

**Imbolo Mbue 49:23**

Oh, wow. Look at that. Thank you.

**Minita Gandhi 49:26**

And I can tell just by your response in listening to her speak, there's some books right there that the rest of you will be picking up a copy on the way out? Yes. You know, just listening to you speak and having read the book. So much of your compassion, your humor, your activism, your feminism, all of that is really represented so well in *Behold the Dreamers*, and in the complex characters that you've portrayed. We have some questions that have come in that we're going to get to. If you have questions that are coming up, make sure to write them on a card and give them to one of the ushers that are walking down or you can continue to use the app and we'll see the questions that way. And as you're continuing to send your questions to us, we're just going to go ahead and start some of the

conversation. You know, I know that you mentioned that you started writing the book in 2011. Is that correct?

**Imbolo Mbue** 50:23

That's correct.

**Minita Gandhi** 50:24

And as you were talking about some of the experiences in your life, having come over from Cameroon, having experienced the immigration process here, how much of the things in your life? Do you feel really started the catalyst for this story? What was the first thing?

**Imbolo Mbue** 50:46

I think, for me, there was a question in America, you know, that sense of feeling as if America was not what I thought it would be. And thinking maybe I'm better off going back home.

**Imbolo Mbue** 51:05

I think that happened at my lowest moment in the country after I finished college when I was selling vacuum cleaners from door to door. And I said, "Did I really come here for this? Is this worthwhile?" You give up so much to come to this country, You give up your home, your friends, being like everybody else in your country and not worrying about being different and having an accent. And then you come here and you look at your life, and you think, did I give up everything for this? And I think that was a big moment for me. And also seeing a lot of my friends questioning is America really worthwhile? And my novel questions this also, is America worthwhile? And the issue of poverty, because like I said, I just thought America was just so good to us. And so we learned this, and seeing how hard it is to get out of it. Also because people say, Oh, look at you, you work hard and now you're a bestselling novelist. But it is such a price to pay and you wonder do I want to pay this price?

**Minita Gandhi** 52:23

I want to touch upon a couple of things that you just brought up because as immigrants there is a fine line that you're consistently straddling, right? You have one foot in one home, one foot in another. And I know you talked a lot about defining home. And you see that in the characters in *Behold the Dreamers*, specifically with the Jonga family. That's the question that they're battling. We're coming here, we have one dream in mind, this idea of the American dream, and it shifts. I know, you just talked about poverty, and I'd love to talk about that in a moment. What else do you think shifts in terms of an ideal of the American dream? And what happens when you're really here?

**Imbolo Mbue** 53:05

It was because in my novel, they also you have to deal with legal statutes so that is compounded. People said to me when I do events around the country, they say, oh, Imbolo, I had no idea how hard it is to not have papers. It is very, very difficult to not have papers. And like Jende Jonga, who not only does not have papers, but he is in danger of being deported. It is very hard. So I think a lot of people don't realize how hard it is to get papers until they get here. You think I got to America, you file papers to become a citizen. But the process is very, very long and very challenging. You need a really good

lawyer, like the characters in my novel, they don't have a good lawyer. So the documentation is also very hard.

**Minita Gandhi** 53:55

How was the immigration process for you?

**Imbolo Mbue** 54:00

Mine wasn't. I had someone who sponsored me. And I'm a citizen now. So while I had my challenges, at least, I had a green card. But in my novel, because they are black, they don't have papers, they know this gender is not very educated. And it's a lot of hurdles to climb to get to that to that mountaintop of achieving the American dream. And that's one thing that Jende Jonga realizes that this is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

**Minita Gandhi** 54:38

So that's the big thing, right? Once you're here it is much more of a difficult process. I'd love to keep talking about the book, but also, I just want to talk a little bit about you and your process as a writer in developing this book. It was published in 2016. And this was your debut novel. And in 2017, she was already on Oprah's book club. And was given the pen Faulkner award, which is an award that is specifically for fiction writers. It's for who is defined as the best novelist, and it is considered one of the most highly regarded awards, because it's all peer considered. That award is given specifically to American citizens. So just three years after you got your citizenship, she received this award, which is pretty amazing. And people are probably like, wow, you this novel came out and you wrote it in just three years. But how long have you been writing? When did you first start writing?

**Imbolo Mbue** 55:46

It took me five years to write it. And it took me maybe 14 years to learn how to write. So people say, Oh, you didn't lie, you didn't take a writing class and you such a great writer. And that is because I spent years learning how to write by myself. And it wasn't pretty. My early writing is atrocious. I wouldn't let anybody see it. But I just had to do it over and over. I think even as a child, I always enjoyed writing. But I didn't think that writing is something we could do as a career. Nobody in my town said, Oh, I want to be a writer. It just didn't exist. Even now people back home, they say, What do you mean, you're a writer? What is that? Because it's just not something that people do where I come from. So I never considered that it was an option for me until, one day after college, I read from the magazine Song of Solomon. And I loved it so much. And I started writing as a hobby. And I was thinking, well, I will write as a hobby. And then now go to graduate school and get a PhD and become a college professor and have a respectable job, because that is much better than being a writer. And that didn't work out for me. That dream fell apart. I never got a PhD. I just ended up being a writer.

**Minita Gandhi** 57:04

It seems to have worked out really well. We have some questions about your writing from the audience. And so here's one you've shared that you taught yourself to write also by reading some of the Oprah book club novels. Do you have any particularly favorite ones off of the Oprah book list?

**Imbolo Mbue** 57:22

Yes. Song of Solomon was an Oprah book club. I definitely loved Jonathan Franzen, The Corrections, which came out many years ago. I love The Poisonwood Bible. So back in those days, I just read. I also wasn't very exposed to American literature. So Oprah's Book Club was my first experience of living in America novelist because I grew up just mostly within African writers and a lot of British writers. So when I discovered Toni Morrison, I thought, Oh, my God, Americans know how to write.

**Minita Gandhi 57:58**

So what are the steps that you take when you're writing? This book is I think it's a 382 page novel. That's a lot of writing. How does that happen? Are you making an outline? Do you start with one idea? Do you just let it go? We'd love to hear about your process.

**Imbolo Mbue 58:15**

I just write until until it's done. I just write and re-write and revise. I have no process whatsoever. That's probably not a good answer, but I have no process. I had an inspiration. When I was unemployed, I went for a walk one day and I saw this chauffeur on the corner of the street and I thought wow, who has chauffeurs? I don't know anybody who has a chauffeur. I don't anybody working as a chauffeur. But the idea of of having a chauffeur or working as a chauffeur, I thought was very interesting. So I went home and I said to my husband who has a chauffeur, and he said the Wall Street guys. I said Oh, so I'm gonna write about the Wall Street guy who has a chauffeur. Because the chauffeur I saw look like an Africans, I thought the chauffeur was gonna be an African immigrant. So Lehman Brothers just happened. And I thought, Oh, I'm going to write a story about a Wall Street guy and his chauffeur, and the Wall Street guy is a Lehman Brothers executive. So that's how the whole thing came together.

And then I did a Google search of a chauffeur's job description. I found out you pick up the wife and take her to the opera, take the children to soccer games. And from there, it was mostly just being very nosy as far as learning about people's lives, because I've never been a chauffeur. I don't know the 1% I don't have any friends that are one percenters. So I had to write about these people that I knew so little about their work. Whenever I met somebody from that world, I say, oh, where did you go for vacation? If I go to their houses, I'll notice what things look like, and the way they talk. So all of this was making files in my head of this world. And for the African immigrant, it was easy because of the town I lived in, Harlem. I had to be very, very cautious about writing about the world of this white family, which was the hardest part about writing this novel because it was very obvious that I did not love them. They see I love the African immigrant. I was very judgmental towards them. And you could tell because the book was rejected over and over. It's so clear that you don't like these people, why would you care to tell their story? And my defense was, Why should I like them? White people didn't have any problems and life is good. And I didn't even realize that I was making the worst mistake by judging them, just by telling their story. So I had to go through this process of leaving my judgment at the door because there's no way I can write a book if I kept on judging them.

**Minita Gandhi 1:01:13**

Great lesson for all of the writers in the room take is you have to leave your judgment at the door. You have to love your characters. And you've done such a great job with just telling their story.

**Imbolo Mbue 1:01:32**

I don't think I love them so much, but I wish them well. People ask me all the time how similar am I to Jende Jonga and Neni Jonga. Don't ask me. How similar are you to Clark Edwards? Because they think what could you possibly have in common with a Wall Street executive man, white man. But the thing is that, after spending five years writing this book, I see myself in him. And after spending so much time on the wife, Cindy Edwards, it was the hardest character to write because she's not easy to like. And so she made me a better writer because when you write about somebody not easy to like, you have to go really deep to see the humanity. And if you don't see then you cannot write it.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:02:27

And you've done such a beautiful job of making all of those characters very, very well rounded. I just have to point out, especially for this Seattle audience, there's a really rare experience that you can have, you can read this novel, and experience that world and also right now at Book-it Theatre, there is a world premiere production that opens tomorrow of *Behold the Dreamers*. And so you can see that whole world interpreted through the director and the playwright. I have to ask you, as an artist, you spend five years creating this whole world. And this isn't actually the first time it's been adapted. It was actually adapted into an opera first, is that correct?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:03:09

In Poland. I didn't see it I just heard, it was good. It was supposed to be a Polish opera of *Behold the Dreamers*.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:03:19

So you didn't get to see it there, but it's been adapted once. So is tomorrow, the first time that you're going to get to see a world that you created adapted by somebody else?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:03:28

Yes. People say how are you gonna feel seeing your book on stage? I think I don't have an expectation because I don't claim this story as my story. I wrote the book, but it's not my story because people gave me this story. This story was inspired by so many people who I met and, and things they told me and what I saw, and it was all about other people's lives that are kind of put together to write the story. It's also been optioned for a movie as long as whatever they do, they are true to the people whose story it represents, I'm fine with it. It not about me, I don't know. Like, I've kind of separated myself that this is not my story. This is the story that was given to me.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:04:14

It's a story to share. And actually on story, just a question about that, you know, our relationship to the stories that we tell, constantly shifts. So where are you in your relationship to *Behold the Dreamers* now versus when you started?

1:04:31

Yeah.

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:04:33

I think, because the story has been so interpreted and analyzed, and everybody has all these symbolisms that I never saw intended, you know. It's like I have no, it's not my story anymore. That's what I mean. I mean, people have come to me and said things like, this is what this means, right? Or this we're trying to do here, right? No, I never thought about that. But because I am. Like, I'll give an example. There's a character in the novel A minor character, her name is Anna. And she's, she's a housekeeper to the Edwards family, the Walton family. And the whole time I'm writing this novel in I could hear her and his voice very clearly she has a foreign accent, but I never had a sense of what she looked like. And so I am. So I was telling a friend of mine, I said, Oh, you know, I think I finally figured out, you know what Anna is, I think a nice like, you know, Eastern European. And my friend said, What are you talking about? She's Filipino? What can I say? Okay, she's sleeping.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:05:40

So I love all we're I love that we're getting such a great sense of how you created all of these characters. And now you have another project coming up that you've been working on? Is that right? Yes, it's been about it.

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:05:52

Yeah. So it is as far from beyond the dumbest as possible. It is way, way darker. It is. not quite done with it. But I'm more comfortable talking about it. Now. It is about when what happens when a small African village decides to fight the ball against an American coal company that is polluting the land? Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's a story. I mean, it's broken me to pieces by tonight. It's been a very, very, very difficult novel to write. But I'm almost done.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:06:29

So we'll be looking forward to watching out for that. I want to touch upon some of the questions, because we have some great questions that were delivered by the audience we have here. You know, I think this is coming from all of the wonderful words that you just shared with us. How would you encourage interconnection and interdependence between people who are different, rather than an ongoing obsession with individuality and success? That? And I think you started speaking to that a little bit by talking about curiosity, and then the necessity of curiosity. Can you speak to that a little bit more? Are there other ways in which you think we can work better, right?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:07:09

Well, I think because I have struggled myself. And I've seen like, I told the story about like, being afraid to go into a gay bar, being afraid to go into a burlesque show. And it's always justifying, like, you know, this makes sense, right? But not realizing that, you know, I could be more open to the world. And *Behold the Dreamers* only happened because I was open to the world. I think that, you know, and because I wasn't a new contract, I had to be opened in order to get where I wanted to get to. But I have learned that I couldn't have it in this story. If I wasn't curious about people. From the moment that I came to America, when I came to college, I wanted— my friend, a gay guy I mentioned that was one of my first friends when I when I came to America—I was curious about him. I was curious about other religions. I went to the church I went to was mostly Korean American church. At one point, I met — I met this guy, he was from West Virginia. And I was like, wow, West Virginia. And he you know, I hope this doesn't sound wrong. But he like he had, you know, he had this long beard, and he and I just had

this fantasy that one day I would marry him and move to West Virginia, like living in West Virginia and becoming a hippie. Because I was just very curious about that world, that I think that that, that fascination with America, because there was so much to learn so much to see so many different kinds of people. Like, it was good that in me a hunger to know more, right? It doesn't mean I wasn't afraid, because there were some of the things that I haven't done yet. You know, like I, I live in New York City, but I still have never gone to a burlesque show. But I think I'm always trying to push myself to say, I want to know more about these people. And that is what happened *Behold the Dreamers*, because when I started writing the novel, the hard part was that I wasn't curious enough about the life of a Wall Street executive. Because he was like, Oh, I know what they like, you know, they have money, they work on Wall Street, you know, like, I have my stereotype that I think of the man. I didn't wake up in the morning, I say, Oh, my God, I want to be empathetic to a rich guy, you know, wasn't like that. But because this story demanded that I be empathetic. You know, people say to me, oh, this novel is so empathetic, but it wasn't natural. You know, it wasn't easy. It was searching myself and seeing that I have my own judgment, I have my own bigotry, you know, and unless I work on that, I can never write the story.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:09:41

That self-examination is so important, and we need to do it. All of us need to do that in order to come together. We have time for just one other question. You know, I wanted to ask you and this has been coming through in a number of the questions It seems that we have a lot of interaction writers in the room? What would your advice be to writers in the room and specifically to some of the female writers in the room in terms of how to get out there and write how to get published?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:10:17

Well, the writing is different from the publishing, right? Because you could write all you want, and you might not care about being published. The writing part is, you know, it's to just do it over and over. I mean, I spent 14 years learning how to write. And maybe because I wasn't so stuck on being published that really helped me. I was waiting for myself in the beginning, you know, I discovered that oh, my God, I can write and I'm gonna just do it, because I love it. And I enjoy it. The publishing thing came years later, years later, after I lost my job. So I didn't have that pressure of being published like other people do. I didn't go to an MFA program. I didn't do anything.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:10:53

How does that happen? Because you got a million dollar deal with Red House, right?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:10:58

Yes, he was a lot of money [audience laughs]. But it was—that happened because there's agents, right. So I didn't sell my book, I have an agent.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:11:10

You have to get an agent.

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:11:13

But I have to talk about rejection, because people, you know, people don't talk about the fact that I was rejected 1 million times by every agent in the country, you know, like, everybody rejected me, not because they didn't like me, but because they could see that I had potential, and I didn't realize my potential. And so it was always like, go back and read again. And I think a lot of writers are so desperate to be published, they want to just put anything out there. And I did not have that I wanted to be an excellent writer first. So I took my time to buy to learn how to write. And then when, you know, when I got caught on getting rejected, I realized I really, really had to have to learn how to write and onto my work was really excellent and then I got, I got an agent. And then you know, she sold the book in four days.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:11:58

In four days?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:12:02

Yeah, he sold the book in four days. But that is because I, at that point, I had learned that, you know, publishing is not, you know, the ultimate thing. The ultimate thing is to be an excellent writer.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:12:12

Can you say that, again? Publishing is not the most important thing, what is?

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:12:15

To be an excellent writer.

**Minita Gandhi** 1:12:16

I think that's wonderful, and some great advice to give to all of the young writers in the room. I think we should all just take a moment to give Imbolo Mbue a huge round of applause and thank her for her time.

**Imbolo Mbue** 1:12:35

Thank you.

**Rebecca Hoogs** 1:12:44

It was truly a joy to hear from Imbolo Mbue in 2019. And to share her talk on the podcast today. Thank you to the Seattle Arts & Lectures staff, board, and community, and thanks to all of you for listening. This show would not be possible without you. Our show is produced by Jack Straw Cultural Center with theme music by Daniel Spils. To hear more, subscribe from wherever you get your podcasts and while you're there, rate and review us five stars so that more people can enjoy *SAL/on air*.