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## Conversation with Imani Tolliver

Janice Rhoshalle Littlejohn · Wednesday, December 6th, 2017

*This is an excerpt from **The Los Angeles Review of Books (LARB)** interview between Janice Rhoshalle Littlejohn and Imani Tolliver. Read [here](#) in its entirety.*

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**JANICE RHOSHALLE LITTLEJOHN:** *Some of the pieces in this collection were previously published, some as far back as a dozen years ago. Were you thinking about a memoir in verse even then?*

IMANI TOLLIVER: I've been working on this manuscript for probably 15 years. As I matured as a writer during those years, certain poems would go in and others would come out. The challenge for me wasn't necessarily the poems, it was how to put them together. I thought, "Do I do it chronologically? Do I do it by chakra?" I saw an Eryka Badu concert and she did it by chakra. I thought, "That's a great idea!"

My wife is a young adult librarian, and she's been encouraging me to write a memoir in verse and I thought: I don't know how to do that. Then we were in Skylight Books, one of my favorite places, and we saw *Brown Girl Dreaming* [by Jacqueline Woodson], and she said, "You've gotta read this book!" So I pick up the book and, of course, it's a memoir in verse.

Her book sat by my bedside for months. I read it quickly. It was almost like a meditation, and it was like the validation I needed, because I hadn't seen any books like the one I was trying to create. I have so many colleagues and friends who say, "When you're assembling a book of poetry it's not just a book of poems that may or may not have a relationship to one another. Your collection of poems needs to tell a story, too!" That was the challenge: What story am I trying to tell?

**JRL:** *Jacqueline Woodson has praised your book, calling it "an ode to what's remembered, what's left behind, and what moves us forward." That it's been published by The World Stage Press is something of an ode to where you began as well. Why did you decide to publish the work on a local independent press?*

IT: I remember last year I put together a visual slide on Pinterest and I put a quote from one of my

poems, and several people have shared it and liked it — not a million people, but even a handful of people who thought enough to say, “Hey, I like that.” I’m hoping to bring that kind of marketing sense to the journey of this book. It’s sort of exciting to shrink the world.

On my Facebook author page, someone sent a picture of himself holding my first chapbook, which I created when I was in college 25 years ago, and I thought, “I don’t even have a copy of that!” And he wrote: “I can’t wait for your book.” Just to know that I exist in someone’s imagination for all that time — and of course there are people that I have read who exist in my imagination in that way, so why can’t it happen for me, too.

I guess I could have reached out to larger presses. Friends of mine have suggested different presses where they thought my manuscript might be a part of that family. But The World Stage is my family. I have faith in it, so I want to support it.

***JRL: The book opens with “These Hands,” which is my favorite. I was particularly struck by these lines: “take what shame tried to make / into your hands and turn it into / something else / change your color / to your wish / into something of your own making.” It almost feels like this one poem encompasses your entire journey.***

IT: What kept looping in my mind was this memory of my mother, who kept telling me my hair was like moss. So it starts with the shame of that, of not being manageable. I didn’t live a manageable life. And then I thought about the journeys of my hair, and in the first part of that poem, I talk about how my mother would put my hair in this little bun at the top of my head. Then I thought about the controlling of this hair, this life. That was the metaphor.

As time went on, as women — and especially as black women — the transformations and the shapes and the colors and what we will allow and what we won’t allow... That was the jumping off point in thinking what was difficult to manage in my own life — not just what was going on top of my head, but what was going on *in* my head: What are the ways people attempted to edit me, or how did they misunderstand me? How were they unkind with the way life was shaping me, or how I was shaping myself?

And as the poem goes on, I think about identity and race and how people see me and how they don’t see me — and maybe it’s cliché, but just that projection of who you see is not who you think you see. When I come back to the hands, it’s about having faith in ourselves to shape ourselves and knowing you’ll find community; that you’ll find your tribe and that you can trust the journey of your own hands; that you can trust the love that lives within you — and the more you do that, the more you will find your home.

***JRL: The poem ends with a wonderful line that someone says to your mother upon meeting her for the first time: “You gave birth to Imani.” And your mom replies, “No, she gave birth to herself.”***

IT: Yeah, that really happened. It was after a World Stage reading. I was on Degnan Blvd. when that moment happened. A friend met my mom outside and she said, “You gave birth to Imani.” And she said, “No, she gave birth to herself.” That was real. I never heard her say that before. I didn’t know that she felt that way, but of course that’s what I did and what I’m doing every day.

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### Poetry

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