

BHM 2021 Presentations

FASS Authors Brown Bag Speaker Event (27 Oct)

Claire Hynes and Yvonne Battle-Felton:

SPEAKER 1: Her writing has appeared in the Bath short Story Award Anthology, Lighthouse literature journal, Tangled Roots Anthology and Wasafiri journal of international and contemporary writing.

Claire's theatre monologues have been performed at the contact Theatre in Manchester and she was a winner of the Common Word Monologue writing competition in 2016.

Claire has also been listed for the Bath Short Story Award in 2014 and commended in the Words and Woman about monologue competition in 2016. Her current book project Room explores the life of her enslaved foremother, Missy Williams. Claire, over to you.

CLAIRE HYNES: Thank you very much. Yeah, thank you very much for inviting me to read. So, I'm going to read from Room and from the piece that was published in Wasafiri journal at the end of 2020.

So, I'm working on a book project just to let you know about what I'm reading from. And basically, it's called Room because it responds to Virginia Woolf's essay called A Room of One's Own. And in that essay Virginia Woolf says that women in order to be creative, in order to write need a room and money of their own.

And I think it's an extraordinary essay. But I found it really intriguing reading the essay, which is much trumpeted and seen as this foundational feminist essay. As a black woman and thinking about the absence of Black Women's History and stories and what is it that Black women need in order to be creative.

Yeah, that's a bit of background about the piece that I'm going to read from. So, I'll start to read now and look forward to answering any questions at the end. Yeah, this is what's the fairy which I mentioned. So, my piece is published in the first conversation took place in the University Council chamber seven years ago.

A professor of literature the author of many books was being honoured although, I wasn't sure exactly why. He was dressed for the occasion in a rumpled suit, yet he was an imposing figure all the same. He had a gray bush of a beard and eyebrows that resembled wings. I forgot the title of his best-known publication at the time, but I think it had something to do with post-structuralism.

I was winding my way through the intellectual crowd. The only woman of colour at the occasion as usual. So was the food table at the back. The food at these affairs was fairly elaborate smoked salmon, cold meats, stored tongue, croquettes, puff pastries, that sort of thing.

My usual lunch was a 1-pound veggie Somoza from the University shop or nothing. So the catering was a key attraction. Anyway, I found my pathway suddenly blocked by the star of the occasion. The professor was regaling his chums about a keynote speech that he had delivered.

Excuse me, I said. But he didn't seem to hear me. As he just articulated to emphasize a point. He elbowed me in the ribs and slopped wine onto my best trainers purchase long before, but when I earned a good income.

He apologized and apologized some more over his wine glass. And when he'd finished asked, who are you? Where are you studying? I told him that I'd finished studying some time ago. And that I was in fact teaching in the same department as him. My answer seemed to come as a surprise.

Really? His voice seemed to echo around the high windowless walls. What are you writing? I explained that my writing was pretty much on hold due to my commitments preparing seminars and lectures, marking papers, and looking after my four-year-old?

I didn't let on about the broader chaos, spare rooms, makeshift beds, clothes in the car, weights and lot sentence. I didn't let on either that much as I love teaching, I was planning to ditch academia at the end of the year. Zero hours contracts I decided were better suited to young people with inheritances.

Have you read Virginia Woolf? He said. Some Orlando Mrs. Dalloway to the lighthouse. You must read Woolf, he interjected. And if you want to write, you must read her essay, a Room of One's Own. It's one of the most extraordinary texts of the 20th century every woman must read it.

The professor turned back to his friends. And that was the end of our conversation. When I reached the food table, I found that the platters had been emptied. The doctor ushered me into the small hospital room earlier this year and asked me to sit down.

I knew the drill. The slow careful words, the slight awkwardness, the chronology of events, relayed in a medical language, some of which I understood much of which I didn't. The scene was familiar from the movies, except the doctor with a Black Antiguan woman.

And after I was led to a curtain cubicle where my mom lay motionless on a hospital bed, and after I'd held her hand I walked or drifted perhaps into a warm night breeze and the sound of chirping Crickets.

In the morning after the woman had called the ambulance had explains how my mom set one up with Milo and she had roll to one side. I lay motionless on a sun lounger, a villa near Long Bay.

I watched my daughter, Zora swimming with my young nieces in the pool. The surrounding villa were inhabited, some were still partly built. The beach below was deserted. Zora emerged from the pool dripping water onto me and said, grandma was monumental, wasn't she?

My mom Aida Louise Williams was born in the village of Sweets in Antigua, the daughter of Irene Williams a schoolteacher and Ernest Emmanuel Williams, the trades union leader. My mom landed the nickname Leonardo growing up after the Renaissance painter. She was rarely seen without a sketchbook in her hands.

She liked to sit on the porch steps to draw the flowers in the yard, hibiscus bougainvillea poinsettia. Local people would stop by to look at her drawings and praise her genius. In 1960 at the age of 16, she left Antigua for the mother country. I expect she had high hopes for her new life in Britain.

We think back through our mothers if we are women, Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*. She argues that women need a room and money of their own if they wish to write and create. And she demonstrates her thinking by discussing the lives of women writers including Jane Austen, the Bronte's, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, Capra Ben, the Countess of Win Chelsea, and Judith Shakespeare, the Fictional Sister of Britain's best known 16th century play write.

The essay prompted me to think about the important women in my life. The rooms and spaces they have occupied, the money they have acquired or not and how we remain

connected. Every time I read Woolf's essay of 1929 about women and what they write and what they don't write and why, I discover some new marvel.

I mean, all of the rich meandering arguments and I'm struck by the intimacy of the voice despite our differences. Here was a privileged white British woman supported by cooks, cleaners, and housekeepers her entire life. A woman with a queenly predilection for using the word one, rather than I. But she questioned the effect of poverty on the mind. She understood that material conditions mattered.

I hadn't planned on buying the Woolf book, I came across it by chance sitting in a charity shop. Smooth, innocence, and on sale for a mere 50 pence. I examined the woman pictured on the cover, she was seated at her writing Bureau in a room, a private study perhaps dressed in a flowy 1920s style dress.

Her Bureau had a pull-out writing desk and below three drawers, with decorative brass handles and locks. And above smaller drawers and compartments to store her writing paper and stationery no doubt.

She was a white woman, but sunlight streaming in from her bathroom window made her skin appear creamy yellow. I began reading at the back of the shop, next to a rack of fusty men's jackets.

I wanted to shout out an agreement. Yes, I needed my own room, so that I could think freely to write. Yes, I needed enough money to cover the cost of a decent place to live, tampons, coconut, or the odd toy, and book proper meals.

I would have continued reading but the shop assistant switched off the lights above my head and called over, sorry love. I need to get home. As I were on my way towards the charity shop counter, I noticed that I shared a similar hairstyle with a white woman with a near yellow skin on the cover.

Her hair was drawn into a plattered side bun, my hair was splattered to the side in a single bunch courtesy of a Trinidadian environmental science student, who charged 30 pounds a time. Apparently, we women carry at least three unique cell populations in our bodies.

Or own our mothers and that of our children if we have them, creating what biologists call a micro chimera, named after the Greek fire breathing monster with the head of a Lion, the body of a goat and the tail of a serpent.

We are not distinct autonomous beings as the father of Western philosophy Rene's Carr argued. We are and made of many. Unfold scientific research it seems is catching up with ideas, her African societies have long held true.

I am because we are rather than I think therefore I am for instance is part of the Ubuntu philosophy. The talented artist it seems, it's not quite so solitary after all. In my own family, shared female connections can't easily be forgotten.

The night my mother died was the night of my daughter's birthday, it was also 100 years to the day since my late grandmother Irene's birth. The room was a little larger than the single bed I shared with Zora. Built into one corner was a wardrobe, which smelt like stale mushrooms.

Squeezed into another with a beaten-up desk and chair. Through the window a row of terraced houses loomed so close I felt barely able to breathe. The room was mostly in darkness, when I began to read but light from the streetlamps shone in through the thin curtains onto the pages.

At midnight, they were shut off due to council budget cuts and I resorted to my mobile phone torch. The bee was like an instrument of interrogation. And I feared my Zora would wake. I was perhaps halfway through the second chapter when my daughter thrashed about suddenly kicking me in the groin.

My thoughts about the women in Woolf's book and in my life were brought to a halt. I feared what would happen if Zora woke up in this still strange room. She missed the Guinea pigs that I'd given away, she missed the trampoline in the old garden, she missed her bed with the bird stickers on the headboard.

A friend of a friend Maria slept with her toddler in the room next door. Through barely there walls on the other side a neighbour was also parenting alone, sharing a room with her baby. I imagine Zora's wolves, wales, triggering a domino trail of young children and babies waking and balling up and down the squashed up row of Victorian houses.

I swiped off the phone lights and lay in the darkness listening to Zora's breath and pondering the day ahead. I had to get Zora over to school for 8:00 AM, I had to teach an undergraduate class that serviced these notes from the underground.

At 9:00 AM, I had to call the bank about my overdraft, I had to speak to my solicitor about my divorce hearing, I had to buy Zora her favorite chocolate cereal bar before school pick up, I

had to prep some self on lecture for the following week, I had to find a new place for Zora and myself to live.

I know about my great, great, great grandmother, Missy Williams from the stories passed down in Antigua through the generations. At the age of 17 Missy Williams escaped the man she was ordered to call master after he raped her on pension estate, a short walk away coincidentally from the villa where I spent the day after my mom passed away.

Men and dogs were sent to track Missy down and bring her back. If caught, she would be whipped, shackled, hung, beaten, burnt, branded, raped again, or drowned. An announcement would have been published in the National newspaper declaring in the language of the day that the young woman had done a runner.

Judging from the notices and the Antigua weekly times in the early part of the 19th century, it might have read something like this. "Absented herself, a Negro woman named Missy about 5 foot 6 inches high speaks good English belonging to Mr. Williams, a very liberal reward will be given on her apprehension by application to the subscriber."

The notice would have been published alongside advertisements for codfish, black eyed peas, and men and women and children all from Africa. Any woman born with a great gift in the 16th century would certainly have gone praised, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village of which half wizard feared and mocked at writes Woolf, in A Room of One's Own.

Alice Walker's essay, In Search of Our Mothers Gardens published over 50 years later in 1983. Responds to Woolf's idea about the fate of talented women through history Walker imagines the lives of Black women who demonstrated their creative genius some 200 years ago.

Women who didn't go mad or Wade into a river Laden with stones like Woolf or topped themselves by any other means. These women decorated the walls of their hut in imaginative ways or sang soulfully and sweetly or wove stunning maps or told incredible stories.

My full mother Missy Williams trekked through cane fields and wild bushland, barefoot, no doubt. Hiding her trails along the way. Eventually she discovers a cave or a jar as it was called then, where she survived for many years until emancipation laws were passed.

Missy would have grown her own food in secret collected water, trapped wild game, and perhaps fished. She would have made good use of her knowledge of plants and herbs. She came from a tradition of women healers who treated all manner of ailments and illnesses.

Often the Bakura would send for these women, healers whose cures were considered more effective than those of white doctors. Missy needed intelligence, creativity, and innovation in abundance to escape her owner and to survive all those years alone in the cave.

No books have been written about her; no statues honour her memory. But Missy's achievements are remarkable all the same. I'll leave it there. Thank you very much.

SPEAKER 1: Claire, thank you so much. I really enjoyed that. I'm sure everyone else did too. So, our next author is Dr. Yvonne Battle-Felton. Yvonne is an author, academic host, and creative producer. She is the author of Remembered.

Remembered was long listed for the women's prize in fiction, in 2019 and shortlisted for the Jhalak prize 2020, and one winner of a Northern writer's award in fiction, in 2017. Yvonne was awarded a Society of Authors Foundation Grant for Remembered in 2018.

She was commended for children's writing in the Faber Andlyn, BAME FAB prize 2017. And has titles in Penguin Random House, The Ladybird Tales of Superheroes, and The Ladybird Tales of Crowns and Thrones.

Yvonne holds a PhD in creative writing from Lancaster University and is a 2019 British Library Eccles center visiting fellow and Principal lecturer in business and enterprise, lead at Sheffield Hallam University where she lectures in creative writing.

Yvonne is also host of Book-able Space, African American literature Lit-Literature Salon and Book-able Space, Middle-Grade Book club. I will hand over to you now, Yvonne.

YVONNE BATTLE-FELTON: Hello and thank you so much for having me. As you can see, I've quite enamoured with the phrase Book-able Space right now. And so, for me I love spaces where there are stories, where people can gather and build community. There's something about that name that reminds me I guess of a bookstore I'd like to have and also the space that I'd like stories and books to take up in my life.

So, I thought I'd talk a little bit about why I write and then I'm going to read a little bit of Remembered. So, I write because growing up books, I feel like they made me a better person. Reading has made me a more empathetic person and it allows me to meet people that I might not otherwise meet, go places that I might not otherwise go.

It allows me to feel in ways that I don't necessarily feel instinctively off the page. In terms of what I get from reading, in a way it's a bit like magic. I feel like it gives me access. So, I don't always ask people the right questions and I don't always maybe listen as effectively.

But there's something about when I'm reading that lets me just immerse myself in someone's story whether it's fiction or creative nonfiction, and it tends to touch me. I reached a point in life where my mother she had moved away, she was moving to Germany to find herself and I felt like I was off the path that I had already envisioned myself to be on.

And books for one of those things that so I started reading a lot of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, some Zora Neale Hurston. And one thing these books had in common was these complex characters who often did things that I didn't necessarily understand or agree with. But I could understand why they did them.

And that might have been the context that they were living in, it might have been some of the restraints they were living under, it might have been for their pursuit of themselves, their pursuit of freedom, love. Whatever it made them more human.

And it also taught me as it continues to teach me that sometimes people do things that might hurt me personally, but they're actually not about me. It's about them and their story and their journey on it. And I might not be a main character in their story and actually that's OK.

But I read in order to feel connected, and I write in order to form connections. So, when I write it's kind of me questioning, exploring, wondering, imagining what's possible, what might have happened, what might happen next, what will it take to fix this, what might this look like.

I write also because on one hand I want everyone to recognize that we all have stories worth telling, worth living and leading that we're all capable of living and laughing and loving, and whether or not you read someone's story doesn't diminish their story.

So, I write as a form of advocacy, on a very selfish note because I want everyone around the world to recognize that my children just like their children have the right to live long enough to die of old age.

I want my children just like I want your children to be happy and in live full lives to be able to make mistakes and learn from them and to be able to live and just prosper, and to do good to create stories. My wish is always for everyone that they will find maybe not their happily ever after but their story.

So, I write as a way to explore my place in the world and my relationships. Maybe what I'm going through or what I'm grappling with, or maybe to understand someone else's journey and to be empathetic, to be a better person. Reading and writing, I feel like they do, they make me a better person than who I would be if I wasn't.

So wrote *Remembered* as my PhD in creative writing. And it was because I had questions and I wanted to know how emancipated slaves reconnected. I was really curious about how mothers and their children found one another physically and emotionally with that healing might look like.

I was curious about relationships with sisters and how being enslaved might have strengthened some of their relationships or challenged some of their relationships. But I wanted characters who had a form of agency even if it was in their mind. I also want my characters to have love no matter how they defined it. It was really important to me.

And so, through all the questions and all the research which included reading newspaper, articles, and slavery narratives, reading fiction, reading non-fiction, reading textbooks, reading interviews. And still coming up short with the questions that I had and will still wanting to see that family reuniting.

Because for me *Remembered* this is a bit of a horror story. And part of that is because, as a mother if I don't know that my kids are safe, if I don't know that they know that they're loved, then I can't sleep at night.

So, *remembered* it's historically influenced fiction. And in the book, there are a couple of characters living and dead. And Spring is the main character and she's been visited by her sister Tempi.

Throughout the story, she's forced to relive these memories that she never told her son about being a slave, about their life, about their past, and she has to relive these memories in order to take him home, whatever home it means.

Edward has been beaten by police in 1910 in Philadelphia for a crime that he may or may not have committed. For me, it was an opportunity to explore the headlines that we continue to see around violence with police and black communities and what that might mean. And sometimes the conclusions that people jump to without knowing the facts.

So *Remembered* I have some newspaper articles. I don't know if you can see these, but there are newspaper articles in some of the chapters. And I wrote those as a way to juxtapose what the article might say versus the life, the reality, the story behind the headline.

So, it let me explore that in a creative way in a way that maybe gives me, maybe not hope but it gives me a chance to explore what ifs and maybes and possibilities. So I'm just going to read two parts of the book.

I'm going to start right there in the beginning. And we are in 1910 Philadelphia. And the book is set in Philadelphia in the present, which is 1910. And it explores 24 years of America slave holding past, so its 1840 to 1864. And for that section, we are in Maryland.

Now we're in 1910 and it's 4:30 in the morning. She's sitting there on top of the ship a robe rocking back and forth, swinging her legs and time to some music she heard 10, 20 years ago. She's like that Tempi. Get something stuck in her head and it stays there like a thumbprint and wet cement.

I want to ask her what she's listening to but I haven't let on I know she's there. I can feel her watching me, smouldering, hating me for ignoring her. It serves her right. It's been nearly a year since the last time she came. She can just sit there brewing and rocking and waiting on me like I've been waiting on her since then.

Mom is dead, she had said. It was fall. She popped up in the middle of the kitchen and plopped into my favourite chair like it was hers, like she'd been there all along it hadn't wasted in smelling the cinnamon and cedarwood. Always burning. Even on a crisp bottom day.

She strummed her fingers on the kitchen table, fingered the cracks, waited. I turned back to the ham had to get supper ready in case Edward came home looking for some little bit to eat between shifts.

She didn't care nothing about my ham drying out, my biscuits burning, and my heart breaking. I couldn't think of nothing worse than having my dead sister sitting in my favourite chair talking about my dead mama.

Mama been dead Tempi, I told her. Wasn't on the turned to face her, I knew her eyes would be burning a hole in my back. She just now died. She snapped her fingers. It sounded like twigs breaking.

I wanted to ask her not to do that no more. You just thought she was dead; I knew she wasn't. If you knew she wasn't dead, why wouldn't you tell me? I basis of ham and pineapple juice and honey, put the biscuits in the hot box, tidy the tea towels.

When I couldn't think of nothing else to do, I turned around. The look on her face said it all. Why would she have told me? We've been keeping secret since we were little girls. Why would death change that?

I skipped forward a little bit so we're still in 1910, we're still in the bedroom and Tempi is still trying to get her sister out of bed. Hurry up. I'm up. She sits on the edge of the bed, I want to reach out and touch her, to hold her, but she's wispy like smoke. She's old.

What used to be in a ghost, you still get old. All these years and she's still on fire. You still mad, Tempi? If I could change, what happened, I would. The air crackles. I should have saved her.

If I had gone back all those years ago, pulled her out of the house, she'd be alive or we at least both be dead. A warm hand above my shoulder. Get dressed. I picked the dress after dress, too flashy, too homely, too proud.

If I knew what I was dressing for, I would know what to wear. The dresses were segregated by event. I flip through work, visiting, entertaining, and celebrating. Sweat slips down my neck, the room gets hotter. Soon I'll be at the last dress. Please don't let me make it to the last dress. I skip over consoling.

Holding my breath, I reach for the long, thick black dress in the back. Not yet. I breathe the thick woody air, swallow the salty lump that rises from my belly and get dressed. Hope. I haven't won this one in years.

So that's the opening of the novel. And Tempi is hot headed, she's which is definitely one of my favourite characters. And in life and in death, the sisters have one another to have their relationship, they have love. And Tempi is to be the bearer of bad news. So, she can only come when someone else's is departing when I'm told, when else is leaving or dying.

And so her sister knows that when she sees her, it's not good news. But she loves her. And that love transcends death. For me, another version of love is toward its page 160 if you happen to have a hard copy.

And in it, we're in Maryland and it's 1862. And I was really curious about there was the emancipation-- but before that, there was news about the emancipation. But after centuries and centuries of being enslaved, I wondered how that might have been like for these characters when they're always given this hope and they're believing it or not believing it, they're hearing rumours you don't know what's true.

You're still living in this environment where you're afraid, but what does hope look like. And who holds on to hope. And I think it's a really powerful thing that some people could hold on to hope and that some people they hoped in different ways.

And so, this is again for me a bit of a love scene. Only the porch is base. It has to be. Anyone fool enough to bound up the creaking wooden step, hop one legged down, the sagging porch. Run around the shaky dinner table made up of splintering crates and risks toppling 10 plates and wooden bowls while yelling sanctuary.

And skating around a ring full of women who had spent hours baking, dusting, cleaning, and boiling. And now only once in a minute to relax without someone underfoot deserves to be free from being tagged. Fair is fair.

You know the rules, Tempi announces. No hiding in the water. No hiding near the water, I add. No getting dirty, Temp1 says. No getting anyone else dirty, no loud yelling, no roughhousing. What can we do? Watson always grinned and asks.

Boy with all those teeth in your mouth at one time, how do you have room for questions? Temp1 teases. Lots and flinches. Tempi is going to count to 100. You are running hide, we'll find you. I say. What if you don't find us before supper? Little Ivy asks. You won't eat, Tempi answers. We'll find you. And if not I won't eat until we do.

I smooth the sprinkling of tears off Ivy's cheeks. And if you reach sanctuary, Tempi pauses winding her arms and wide flourishing circles while I point to the porch. You win. Has anyone ever reached sanctuary? Watson asks.

Tempi and I think it over. No. I close my eyes and hold a finger up as Tempi counts. 1, 2, 3. The heavy padding of careless feet gives a little one away. One hides in a nearby tree. One scampers to the edge of the wood turns and burrows beneath the canopy, two hide in tall grass on the side of the house.

One heavy footed one probably, Franklin stomps behind the house. Another one hides underneath the tin washtub. One shifts one foot to the other. There's always a runner. Please just go hide behind the house. I'm sweaty and I thought of chasing one of them makes me hotter.

What do you think they talk about in there? Tempi asked somewhere between 25 and 29 men. Why would they do that? Well, you heard the men, they just talk about the women. I've been practicing my grown-up voice.

The men only talk about the women when they want the women to know what they're talking about. How do you know that? I've heard what men talk about when women in around. Are you all even counting? A little voice asks from behind the wash basin. 65, Tempi yells.

Giggles, swishing grass, the curling and curling of little legs in tight places and then silence. The silence of little children waiting for something good and terrible all at once. Got you makes little hearts beat faster.

Well, what do they talk about? I ask. Sex. Told you. And politics and religion and war and freedom, all that. And more when they get riled up. Is that what you do at night? Go down and listen to the hired hands talk. Sometimes.

The words fall out and I can't do nothing to get them back. And Tempi looks down when she answers. Tempi can't hold her lies any more than old Misses can hold her liquor. A flash of brown skinned and dingy denim. Ready or not, here we come, Tempi shouts.

Lots and long brown legs and thin bony arms flailing is already halfway to the porch. He's panting and sweating, his chest pumps hard. I just watch it, glistening, run. Tempi's long, shapely legs carry her to within inches of Watson and it look like she's hardly breathing.

She cuts through the yard with hardly no effort at all. It doesn't seem fair. Tempi can catch him many times she wants. She knows the land and made the rules. Got you, got you, got you. I tap each little head quickly dashing from one to the next, so I can turn back to the race. There are no tears this time. The little hearts raced along with Watson's. Run.

Watson is just a few strides ahead of Tempi. If she leans forward just a little more, she will have him. If not, he'll reach the porch sanctuary seconds before her. He slows and even from the back of his head, I know he's grinning. His urge sharply. You're running the wrong way. I can't get the words out fast enough. But then I see he isn't running the wrong way at all. The women must have heard the commotion, armed with broomsticks they take to the porch and synchronized annoyance. They stand guard.

Around back the men have already stopped talking about the war, escape and freedom. They're out front. Gruff voices whispering. Run. Tempi must have seen it then. . We all do Watson isn't running for the porch, Tempi stops. She stands still whispering. Run, run, run along with everybody else.

Watson never stops running. I wish he had taken me with him. And that is the end of what I'll be reading for Remembered. The book challenged me in terms of writing it. It broke my heart many, many times. But mostly it taught me or let me see again and again and again, the power of stories to build community.

And the way that we need those stories, the way that we pass them on to those that we love, to our communities, the way that we build communities around these stories, and the ways that they sustain us and can fill us up.

I learned the value of community in a different way, because while I was writing remembered I was also co-hosting an event that was a true storytelling open mic night, where people, they told us their stories. And they trusted us with them in this space.

And for me, it's how I got to know Lancaster, it's how I got to know people. And it was practicing what I preach and just enjoying the power of stories to look at how I move through the world, to get to know people, but also to write the stories that I want to read and live and create the experiences that I want to have. So, thank you so much for listening today.

SPEAKER 1: Yvonne, thank you very, very much for that.