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[Episode 46: Collaboration](#) - (December 2015)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: Sarah Lester – **SL**, Nathan Penlington – **NP**

Transcript edited by Harriet Foyster – 17/04/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is episode eleven of the Lunar Poetry Podcast. And today I'm joined by Sarah Lester and Nathan Penlington, hello you two.

SL: Hello.

NP: Hello.

DT: And this episode is going to be based on collaboration between artists but obviously more specifically today between writers and I'm going to let my two guests introduce themselves. We'll start with Sarah.

SL: Hello, I'm Sarah. I worked on... I'm one of the writers of [An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in London](#). I used to work as the assistant editor of an online magazine called the [Journal of Wild Culture](#), and I work as a researcher at [UCL](#).

DT: Thank you, and Nathan?

NP: Hello I am Nathan Penlington. I am a writer and a performer. My history is a little bit different to Sarah's. I have been writing and performing within the poetry world for about twenty years now, I think, since I first moved to London. So, I've got a lot of background in performance poetry but also in performing magic, oddly, and I've combined my love of literature and performance in my last few projects. My last project was a live, interactive documentary based on [Choose Your Own Adventure](#) books.

DT: Thank you very much, and we also have another guest which is Kook, Sarah and Nathan's cat, and I only said that because...is she a she?

NP: A she. She will make herself known.

DT: She may well jump up and knock the microphone or something, just so you know that's not me! Yes, so as Sarah mentioned they have recently released a book in collaboration with each other and it's called [An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in London](#). And it was... I'm going to use the word recreation, even though it's not, and we will explain as to why it's not a complete recreation of George Perec's book [An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris](#), which was written in 1974.

It's forty years on from the original book. Maybe... Actually, Nathan maybe if you explain, just very briefly, what you did... The process of writing the book, but very briefly, and then it will be easier to get into the questions.

NP: Okay so the book chronicles a weekend in Hackney and it's based on George Perec's book forty years earlier in 1974. He spent three days in a square in Paris documenting everything that happened. So, we tried the same experiment forty years later, but with a slight twist in that both me and Sarah wrote our own separate accounts so they run alongside each other and quite often pull the text and observations in different directions.

DT: And I'm going to start with asking you both... It seems... Especially if you read the original by George Perec it seems to present itself as a very solitary exercise to sit on your own and observe the world around you. Why did this idea present to you as a collaboration? How did that come about?

NP: Well I've kind of been interested in experimental writing for a long time and it's one of my passions within the realm of literature.

And yeah, the idea of sort of celebrating the anniversary of a kind of series of non-events was hugely appealing in my love of kind of absurdity. But I think in approaching it as a collaboration really transforms the nature of the text and the idea of observation and what that might mean. So that was kind of the main impetus really for making it, the collaboration between the two of us.

SL: I think I just wanted to see if I'd do it as a kind of challenge which I knew would... It would spur me on knowing that Nathan was doing it, so it's maybe more competitive in that I just wanted to put some time in and see what happened, with no real view to thinking 'oh this will be a book at the end,' but just to think 'okay well I want to spend some time, I enjoy writing, let's see what happens.'

NP: Yeah there was no original aim that this would definitely be a book.

DT: Yeah. It was an exercise that you both wanted to carry out. Yeah.

NP: Yeah, it was an exercise and it would have ended up being a private homage in a sense, we had no real idea if the writing was good enough until we kind of brought the two pieces of writing together, set it out and started looking at it in detail really.

DT: I wanted to ask, you sort of answered that question slightly already, but was it difficult to make mundane observations without being aware of somebody reading it afterwards? Were you tempted to make it more interesting, the text?

SL: Yeah, I guess there's always a slight pressure to... It's more like as you're watching something happen or something unfold you'll always have your own take on what that is and there's never going to be some objective dry way of writing about something. Everyone would always have their own input into what they're actually saying, however mundane it might be.

But I didn't... I know I could have tried harder to be like 'oh this is going to be laugh out loud funny all the way through' so it was almost like a bit of tension between 'I'm still going to try and be honest to the situation that's happening' but then there's always going to be the odd little quip that you'll think of in your head in and record that. But everything is as it happened.

DT: I was surprised when I read the book because I think I had an idea in my head that it was going to appear like a weather journal, you know very dry in that sense of just logging events at certain times. But you do... I suppose if you're going to spend that much time in the cold on your own then your mind will wander to other things and it's... Did you find yourself having to rein it back a bit and not be too elaborate in the way you describe things?

NP: I think... I think this is fair to say, I think my account is more self-reflective at times.

SL: I... When I started reading Nathan's account I got a bit annoyed that he'd put so much more of himself in it because I thought mine might seem almost more dry in comparison because I tried to keep that distance but then Nathan has put these more, kind of, poetic ruminations and then I was like 'oh I didn't do that, I didn't think that was what we were doing.

NP: Well yeah but there wasn't really any sort of set rules as to how you, kind of, approach the accounting of what went on and I think it sort of takes over the... Your idea of kind of your experience within writing and literature, I think sort of takes over within that kind of documenting something. You can't really separate yourself out from the process of doing what you were going to do.

DT: It was interesting to see the subtle differences between the way you both recorded. I don't know if you agree but Nathan's accounts seemed to... You seemed to speculate as to why people were doing what they were doing, or where they were going, whereas Sarah was a bit more interested in just explaining in more detail what people look like.

NP: Yeah, I think that's fair to say.

DT: Whereas you seemed to dream off a bit.

NP: Yeah, I think Sarah's account is definitely more detailed in... Yeah in ways that mine wasn't, yeah reading back through you can kind of...

DT: How did you both decide on what you were going to be observing? You know so this practice essentially was to ignore the big things we would normally look at in life and focus on the mundane and the banal and the small details. But how as an artist did you decide what was banal and what was mundane?

NP: That's a very good question. So, it started on the Friday, knowing that you've got three days ahead of you to do this. And I kind of started with the idea of trying to catalogue things in areas and groups of types of things that you might see. And that kind of quickly fell away, you end up... I don't know it's what your eye is drawn to I guess. And I guess that helps also then reflect the personality of who has written the piece really.

DT: Yeah.

NP: I think by day two I got fed up of cataloguing the buses.

DT: Yeah you comment on that, don't you? Yeah.

NP: You can't do it. You know I was thinking I was sort of being distracted from the main task, but there is no main task and that's kind of part of the joy of the experiment in a way.

DT: But did you discuss beforehand what you would try and look at or did you...?

SL: What with each other?

DT: With each other.

SL: No, I don't think we really did. We'd been looking at Perek's version and I think there's something that he says about... It's not about the buildings or the important things or things that would be recorded in the records, like civil documents of that time, it's things that would be transitory, fleeting moments or something.

DT: Well he described it as being the infra-ordinary, didn't he? Like the stuff that just sort of permeates a space rather than...

NP: Well it's those moments that make up the majority of most peoples' lives. All of us spend a lot of time doing things that are essentially invisible. If you were to catalogue your life you wouldn't talk about those tiny ordinary moments.

DT: I wrote down a quote here and, ridiculously, didn't write down which of you said this.

SL: This is a game!

DT: It's from the book, but no... More of a judgment on myself but it's just relevant to this. You wrote how it was hard to keep focussed on the task and to persist with the accurate, acute observation of the ordinary. And did you find yourself losing track of what was ordinary?

NP: Yeah. Yeah it is.

[Laughter]

NP: This is going to sound so pretentious! Yes, it's utterly hard to keep going in a way. I wrote everything by hand as well.

DT: I was going to ask that, yeah.

NP: And Sarah...

SL: I used a laptop because I'm sensible and knew that would be quicker.

NP: But in a way, for me I kind... I don't often write by hand anymore. And I think that really helps the process of... It obviously slows you down but then it kind of... I think it is something for me, as a writer, that really helped.

SL: But I felt inconspicuous by having a laptop because I think so many people sit there on a laptop. If I was there writing by hand I'd have felt a bit out of place and maybe more self-conscious about doing the task.

DT: Actually was that an issue for you both as well to hide as much as possible? Did you become self-conscious?

SL: I felt creepy at various times.

DT: Because it's not a very nice thing to do writing about people in that way, is it? Like cataloguing buses and stuff, that's one thing but...

SL: I felt... To start with I was like 'ooh I could be an undercover spy, this is really romantic and cool' and then I thought 'no I'm just staring at people like a weirdo.' And there's only one moment in the book, there's a guy who does turn around and he looks at me and I'm writing about him doing it. But then it's really nice because he just smiles. And then I record that and I'm like 'oh well he helped me finish that sentence' so that's the only proper interaction I had I think, which is depressing.

[Laughter.]

SL: I didn't even bump into any friends, I live here!

NP: I mean I saw a couple of people I know and kind of failed to recognize, and then I think I said hello to the postman which is also good. But I think there's a bit when we were actually in the square near a wedding taking place and it was those moments I felt very self-conscious, with a lot of people around... Definitely doing something creepy.

SL: But there are enough weirdos around. I mean no one.

NP: I mean that's the beauty of... That's why I love living in a place like this.

DT: And that place is Hackney by the way, if we forgot to mention that earlier. In the square outside in Hackney Town Hall, beside Hackney Empire, so there's a lot going on.

NP: Yeah. It's a very, very busy area but in a very ordinary urban way. I think that's the best way to describe it.

DT: And to avoid seeming horrendously London-centric, Hackney is in east London, people get really angry when you just say borough names of London, which I understand. So, Hackney, east London. Actually, now might be a good time for a reading, and give more of an insight as to how the observations worked, and then we can carry on chatting so, we'll start with Nathan.

NP: This is a short section from the end of day one;

Date: 24 October 2014

Time: 4.40 pm

Location, Middle of the square, sat on the stone wall

Weather: Grey, darkening clouds threatening rain, 17°C

The sound of a man playing the accordion outside the front of the Hackney Empire, fondly. Another man, moustachioed, in his fifties perhaps, is dancing on the corner of the square. Every now and then he raises his hands to the sky - either beckoning or questioning.

[...]

And now here I am, the most central position you can occupy in the square. There is a moderate calm here, away from the edges, the push of the bus stops.

A man with a closed umbrella struts up and down pigeon-like in front of me, along the central aisle.

On the steps of the town hall stand a very small wedding party - the bride and groom and five other people pose for a photograph.

There is a huge compulsion to look for narrative, but square life is made up of purely transitory moments.

The man with the umbrella suddenly raises his arm and shouts.

The pigeons, scared by the sudden noise, flutter upward briefly, and land again as the man with the umbrella hugs a woman he obviously loves.

The stone wall I am sitting on is engraved with the number 88, now neatly coloured in by dark green moss.

The middle of the square is rarely used in comparison with the edges.

Brad Pitt.

Free for six months.

The accordion player is adding a Frenchness to this most London of locations.

Peachy finance.

Three schoolboys in red blazers eye up a group of girls from another school, blue and green blazers.

One of the girls unzips her violin case, starts playing a kind of John Cale drone.

A girl cycles passed with what looks like, from a distance, a baguette. A baguette! An actual French reference in London forty years later! As she gets

closer the baguette transforms into what is probably a roll of cooking foil.
Foiled.

I've moved to a bench on the north side of the square. To the right of me the unbroken vista of the town hall. To my immediate right is another jailed tree. At the bottom of the trunk is a plaque - Commandment number one of any civilized society is this: let people be different. Holocaust Memorial Day 2006.

This weekend is about cataloguing difference and sameness, about the importance and insignificance of the ordinary.

An exodus of work pass wearers.

"If she's one of those lazy pregnant women" - the middle of the sentence lost to traffic - "do you understand?" a woman says emphatically into her phone.

Three seagulls circle overhead.

Two of the trees in the square are covered in red berries; fallen berries also fill the gaps in the paving.

A leaf falls.

Cars and buses have started to turn their headlamps on.

The trees are bound in thick wire that bristles with small LED lights. The wire has become part of the trees, electronic branches that replace the leaves lost to winter with light.

30 heading north.

277 heading north.

55 heading south.

254 heading north.

254 heading north.

A woman sits in the middle of the square where I was a moment ago, her back to the road, smoking. From experience I know that she occupies the most peaceful area of the square, today at least.

©Sarah Lester, Nathan Penlington. *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in London* (Burning Eye Books, 2015)

DT: Thank you and very brave for choosing to read the section with the sentence blue and green and blazers because that's really hard to say.

NP: There are quite a lot of tongue twisters in there.

DT: Yeah yeah, you don't realize until you try and read it out. I want to talk now about the physical, mechanical processes of writing this particular book because I think the reason I wanted to talk about collaboration is that often it's discussed in a very sort of artistic way and all that really matters is...

People focus on the compromises that have to be made with artists but I think people miss out on how difficult it is to tie in two different points of view, so if we just start with... So the whole process took three days in Hackney square, and just say that... Sarah, you weren't involved on the first day, were you?

SL: I just went into work that day and... yeah.

DT: It's a perfectly reasonable excuse, and it sort of highlights that most of this stuff is done in people's spare time.

SL: Yeah, if nothing else! I wasn't committed enough to the project because I went off to work...

NP: Yeah what kind of artist are you?

[Laughter.]

NP: I mean it also highlights the ordinariness of the thing. It doesn't regard it as...

DT: So like you said before... You know you said earlier that, Sarah, you turned up with a laptop and Nathan you were there with a notepad and pen, can you just sort of briefly outline how the day would have been structured, you turned up and... How much relevance did George Perec's structure of his original exercise did that influence?

NP: Yeah. So, I'd kind of looked at his original timetable and his timetable was purely arbitrary. If you read the original it's based on how bored he gets, he often gets a glass of wine in a cafe and comes back.

DT: He drinks a lot of brandy.

NP: He does, he has a lot to drink. I had a lot of tea but that was about it. So the start and end of each day were roughly around the same time.

SL: He sticks it out until he just starts to refer to things... The headlights on the cars...

NP: On the first day, yeah.

SL: ...Things like that. And then the days get shorter as the weekend goes on.

DT: Yeah, the last day is barely.

NP: So we stuck to his... I mean it seems purely fitting, not only as a tribute, but as a kind of literary device in a way, that you're constrained by... Constraints.

DT: But how important was it... Going back to this idea of whether you were recreating what George Perec did or... How do you feel? Were you trying to recreate it?

SL: I largely forgot about Perec when I was doing it actually, I have to say.

NP: I think it was more the idea of doing it on the anniversary and framing the time scale, that was about it. Particularly seeing as Sarah sort of comes in on the second day and that breaks that whole thing apart.

DT: Was there a performance element to it, about carrying out the process?

SL: Only in terms of... Once I got into one of the cafés I was like 'I need to get the best spot' and I got really competitive about 'well my line of vision is really important, you've got to understand that.' But then at 10:30 on a Saturday or Sunday morning no one else is really around anyway. But then as it gets busier you think 'I really need to get a good table.'

NP: It's an interesting question actually because I think the second day... On the third day perhaps, I was conscious of trying to get the same spots sometimes, or different spots or totally trying to sit in different places in the square, or the same place but different time.

DT: It's interesting, now looking back at the exercise, now you have the book, is there any regret that you didn't document the process at all?

NP: No, not for me.

DT: I mean visually, sorry, obviously you've documented it with your writing.

SL: You mean photographs or something like that?

DT: Or just maybe even through a third party.

SL: No, I'm pleased that we didn't do that.

NP: I think particularly as we're living in a time when we're flooded with photographs and video...

SL: I was thinking there is probably CCTV footage of that same three days. I don't know.

DT: I'm not suggesting that it would have been a different or a better project had there been visual documentation, that more refers to my point about it being a performance. Did you want to record the physical act of recreating an exercise?

NP: No I think, particularly for this, the idea of removing the visual element is really important I think. It didn't start out as an idea that it would definitely be a book and I suppose that helps the idea of whether you document something or not.

But even if we'd really thought about it and said yes this is going to be a book I don't think most... I still wouldn't have wanted to have photographed where we were or the locations. I mean it's documented purely through text and I think that really helps.

SL: But not purely through text because we've got illustrations.

NP: That's another sort of... I don't know what you'd call it... Transcription in a very different way.

SL: Because we were really cautious that some of the illustrations... We made a call out for artists and illustrators then we thought if someone did just photograph the square how that would seem to betray the project and what we were doing, to have a very literal photo of just the town square. It would be that risk of dryness that I think you were talking about.

DT: If you just offered up a photograph to an audience that's allowing them to choose what's mundane and it sort of goes against the whole point. You as artists and observers are taking it upon yourself to tell people.

NP: The writing translates it into something else from a very personal point of view I guess, you're making the incredibly ordinary become important, I think taking a photo would still be ordinary.

SL: If you're a very skilled photographer, someone like [Martin Parr](#), someone who's going to put their own.

NP: It would be interesting to get someone like Martin Parr to document over the three days and really take thousands of photographs but I just don't think you would get...

DT: No no and I think that would be distracting from what point of the project was anyway. That's it. I didn't mean images as document. I mean we're agreeing. But the reason I ask also, as Sarah just mentioned, the book is illustrated and maybe you could explain a bit about how that came about and why you chose to have any form of visual illustration.

SL: Because we spent so much time in the square we started thinking 'well there are so many other artists and people around who also live in this place and we wanted to get their take on it, and then we just had the idea of putting up some ads in newsagents windows or in some of the bars that are in the area and put a call out for artists.

NP: It was a pretty vague call out as well. I think we were quite conscious not to put too much in it.

DT: Were people were just responding to your brief or did any of the artists have the text to respond to as well?

NP: No. So, the advert just said... Handwritten signs in the newsagent next to the massage, sweet massage and man in van. So, it was a handwritten message as I said, 'artists wanted to illustrate a book on Hackney,' and then an email address. So, people had emailed and we wanted to kind of engage with people who perhaps observe more of their environment in a way. It could be so easy just to go through social media and find artists that way.

I think it's better to try and find people who are paying attention really. Once they had emailed we had said we were looking for artwork that reflects the kind of small interactions that happen in the square. So, people sent their work back to us and we were amazed really by the quality in the work that was sent back to us. But like Sarah said we were conscious of trying to avoid photographers in a literal sense.

DT: I've got a couple of questions now which may not really be of much interest to people but I bought the microphone so I'm going to ask them anyway. It's my podcast.

[Laughter.]

NP: Go on, you can ask anything you want, we've got to answer!

DT: It's about the editing process, the physical editing process. How did you keep your overlapping observations...? Just a brief explanation about the layout of the book, when you are both observing the square there are alternate pages with your different observations. But you seem to have spent a lot of time on the layout.

Are you trying to keep your observations in chronological order? How did you do that, physically, because it seems like a nightmare? If you've handwritten yours and you've typed yours up.

NP: Well yes. I mean once we'd finished writing it Sarah sent me her stuff over to look at. I was like 'this is actually... this is really good.' And then I spent ages typing mine up, laboriously like 'what the hell did I write this out by hand for?!' So, once we had the two documents we realised that there was something interesting here.

It was about trying to juggle it through word programs just to see... I guess that comes from my background in poetry really and space on the page. I had a collection out quite a few years ago that was graphic poetry where the form of the poem graphically was the poem or the content of the poem at the same time.

DT: Did you have anyone advising or helping with the graphic layout of the book?

NP: So yeah once we'd got [Clive Birnie](#) involved, from [Burning Eye Books](#)... Yeah he was involved with the layout and that became a conversation between the three of us.

DT: So that was a three-way conversation and not just between the two of you. And the second question which I'm sure no one will ever care about is to indicate who is writing each section your names are very faintly printed in the corner. Who thought of that?

NP: This is a good point. Is it a fault or is it a good thing?

SL: It's so ridiculously faint but we've decided we like it. We did get a version, a PDF, to check through before it went to print, and it was really quite darker on that version, more prominent and we were like 'maybe we should lessen that down a bit.' But they took that a bit too literally I think.

NP: But in a way, I kind of quite like the semi-anonymity of that. I think you're aware as you read it but it allows you to kind of move between the pages. Perhaps you read across, you read down.

DT: Yeah it does allow you to read the book in different ways. You could go through it reading one go of Sarah's account and then similarly with yours. Actually, I really like the fact that the names are there but very faint. My main question was about whether it was a happy accident or whether... Because the question arises if you're going to put the names in very faintly, why put them there at all? If you're going to have an indication as to who wrote what... I'm just very interested.

SL: You've got to admit though it would be far more confusing to not have even the slightest clue that they're different accounts.

DT: I really like confusing people though.

SL: Do you?

DT: I would happily, deliberately make a book as difficult to read as possible.

NP: I think there's a danger there, I mean, with anything that's experimental in terms of literature or whatever you want to call it is to kind of make it too difficult. I think with a lot of work that I've done I'm attracted to the experimental, I'm also attracted to more popular forms and trying to meet the middle ground is always... You have to make some kind of allowances by making some things easy for readers I think.

DT: And Sarah I asked you earlier about whether there was a temptation to make your writing interesting or funny with a view to it being read at some point. When it was becoming a... When you knew it would be a book or a manuscript of some sort, in the editing process was there a temptation to polish things up?

SL: Oh totally yeah. Nathan had to really hold me back on that because I was so ready to rewrite the whole thing like 'oh someone's actually going to publish my work!' I totally had a different opinion on everything that I'd done. I was like 'I can't have that in a book, I want to polish it all up' and then Nathan, because he's so much more used to having these kind of rules that he'd impose on making his own art...

Then I thought 'no, okay, I've got to stick with it' and literally tweaked one or two things just for making sense of stuff maybe but not to change the meaning so we were really quite... It was hard but we were pretty faithful to the process. Because once you start changing one or two things to be like 'oh I'm going to make that sound wittier' then you're going to jeopardize the whole process and what you set out to do.

DT: I suppose in part it's important that the text is as bland as what you were looking at isn't it?

NP: Yeah and if it's a list of buses you get a list of buses.

SL: But then saying that I don't think we should be too hard on ourselves, once or twice I was laughing at my own stuff going 'I think this is alright' and I was even surprised at that.

DT: And you're okay with admitting that on record?

SL: I should have said Nathan's!

[Laughter.]

NP: If you were more gracious! 'I laughed out loud at some of yours... No, I laughed out loud at my own things.'

SL: I was pleasantly surprised.

NP: I think that's a fair comment. I think when you set out with something to do just because you're going to do it, when you're surprised at it I think that can only be a good thing. Because otherwise I don't think you'd get your work out there. I think that helps with kicking it over the line.

SL: And I think framing it as more of an experiment took some of the fear away of like 'oh this isn't my best writing' because yeah it was a fairly quick turnaround in terms of the process. Yeah, we put some time in the editing process, actually sitting there for two or three days in Nathan's case but it's not the same as sitting writing an article or something where you're like 'I'm actually trying to get something across that's meaningful.'

DT: It's interesting isn't it how sometimes a very strict framework can allow you to be more free because it takes the pressure of you being... I always find it's surprising and quite pleasant the creative people are quite happy when the obligation to be creative is taken away.

NP: Yeah you can't make up the things that you're seeing.

SL: It's interesting that you say that because I saw Darren Hayman, you know from the band [Hefner](#)? I heard him speak the other day at Queen Mary, he was talking about how

he's got these concept albums. One of them is about the English civil wars and how he'd been using these very kind of strict rules to create these albums more recently.

Then he started saying he found it really strange that the concept album is still seen as a bit of an anomaly and that writing ten random songs about someone's life is like the main form and everyone thinks that's great and commendable. He was like 'it's great that you can have a strict framework they're still completely personal albums that I'm making even though I'm writing about something that happened in the 17th century. And I totally got that and I think he's great.

NP: I think the idea of the scaffolds that hides within the work is really important. As a reader, you don't always need to know the constraints behind someone's creative process.

DT: You can definitely tell that you've both tried to be creative in your own way within that framework because like I said it wasn't just an observation log, it wasn't a list of things that happened, you did either speculate or question in different ways and it was... You were trying to express in your own voice what happened and that was why it was so nice to have the two views next to each other, rather than with Percec's single-minded, quite bored view, he quite clearly seems really disappointed that he's gone through with actually doing it.

[Laughter].

SL: I almost wonder if maybe we were spurring each other on knowing that the other person was out there... I was joking when I said it was a competitive thing for me but maybe that's what kept us going a little bit more because the odd time I'm like 'oh I can see Nathan in the square' and you're always conscious that that other person is there doing the same thing and you want your account to be perhaps that bit better because you know they're going to read it.

DT: Have either of you worked in collaboration with creative projects before?

NP: My last project, the live interactive documentary, was I suppose my first big collaboration and that was with three filmmakers who were very much part of that process of making this stupidly elaborate 'Choose Your Own Adventure' narrative come together. Yeah so that was my first big collaborative project.

SL: I can't think of any big collaborations.

DT: No no, it's just for the audience, whether it's a new thing or...

SL: It is new to me.

DT: But how difficult was it to give up control on a project like this? I mean maybe it's a bit difficult because it wasn't ever intended to be a book and it was just an exercise which probably made it easier to go into. Was the editing process more difficult because then it was becoming a...

NP: I think it was the... It wasn't really difficult in that sense I guess, it was... I mean there were times when you were like 'oh I don't know about that line, can I take it out, can I add something to it.' Because it's so easy to go and break some of the rules you've set yourself. Trying to stick to them is kind of the hard thing. But apart from that it was a pretty painless process really.

DT: Was it... Well I suppose if you've not really done much collaboration... I was going ask you if it's different because you're a couple but if you've not really got much experience previously of working collaboratively maybe you'd just be guessing.

SL: I have worked in a collaboration! I've just remembered! Oh no, it's not quite a collaboration...

DT: That's a point I was going to say... We perhaps can't get into it because it would take too long, but there's a very big difference between collaborative work and participatory work, you know where people join in. There are different levels of collaboration and depending on how much control you give someone... There's a difference between letting them collaborate and letting them participate in your project.

SL: Yes.

DT: But what you did together seems like a true collaboration.

SL: Yeah. Yeah. The example I thought of was someone asked me if I'd write something for an [exhibition](#) and it was about having five photographers... It was an all female exhibition with five female photographers and five female writers and we were paired up and I had to write something which was in response to this girl called Victoria Jenkins' photos. So that's a very hands off collaboration but you're still trying to be faithful to what someone's created in the first place. So I mean that's very different from what happened with Nathan. But that was also quite a nice restriction in terms of writing something and it having to respond directly to something else.

DT: I think we're going to take another reading from you Sarah, and then we'll get on to talking about what it is to be an observer, as a writer.

SL: Date: 25 October 2014
Time: 12.12 pm
Location: Stage 3, Hackney Empire café
Weather: Still grey, but with black clouds forming. Becoming overcast

Better view. More expansive without sections of wall blocking vision.
Panoramic.

A woman scoots by on an electronic mobility scooter. Again, she seems faster than the cars.

People wearing yellow raincoats, too many to count.

A girl holding hands with her mum - clutching something with silver and gold fringing that looks like it was made at school. A broken kite, or a Hallowe'en decoration that has gone wrong. She's not crying, she looks stoic in the face of disappointment.

A girl, early twenties, oversized coat, shorts underneath, dark glasses. She's holding a bottle of water in the crook of her elbow. Borderline sporty but with the dark coat and glasses she looks knowing and wise.

A young man with curly hair. Obviously hungover but holding it together.

Two very old women. Could be mother and daughter, or friends. They are both holding on to a shopping trolley as if it's an IV stand.

A teenage boy in a tracksuit kicks at a pigeon. It flies off, but is not frightened. More aloof.

Another mobility scooter; this one is sturdier and is much slower. Slower than walking pace. The driver stores her walking stick in the 'boot'.

A young girl, pretty, with an *I heart Hackney* bag. Blue duffel coat with the hood up.

Two couples walk by in opposite directions. One couple have matching beanies and are holding hands the other pair are talking, around a metre apart from each other. Intense, animated gestures.

A group of friends, two girls and a guy, walk by in a triangle formation.

Pigeon kicker now has a friend, in a mustard-coloured tracksuit.

An old man, grey hair, two wooden sticks (homeless), propels himself forward, very slowly. One of his legs seems injured, or perhaps both. He looks like a stock character from play.

A goth couple walk by. The man seems pleased that he has a girlfriend.

A woman, serious-looking, holding two items of dry cleaning.

A woman holding hands with a man. She's wearing heeled brown boots and a woolly hat with two pompoms so she looks like Minnie Mouse.

Three men that look like they drink craft beer, but not in an affected way. They just have beer bellies and are in their early forties. They look like they are (were?) into music.

A man saunters across the cobbled stretch of road in front of the theatre with his hands in his pockets. Beige trousers, brown suede boots, blond tousled hair and tan. He walks with confident strides like a top-tier Abercrombie & Fitch model.

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DT: Thank you very much. Yes, so we're going to talk a bit about what it is to observe and why bother. The way you took on this project... Was it a criticism of other writers and the way they look? And when I say otherwise I mean you as yourself, but is it a general criticism that we don't look properly as writers?

SL: I think as people we don't look properly. I don't think it was meant to be anything specific to do with writers as such. I just think, myself included, I was amazed at how little I had actually observed about the area next to where I've lived for four years.

NP: And yeah, I just think we, particularly in an urban environment, just don't have the time or the mental capacity to spend that long really looking and observing things. And I guess in London particularly you tune out quite a lot of that stuff otherwise you would probably drive yourself quite mad on a daily basis.

DT: And do you think in general we can be guilty of believing that we just know places? You know you're so used to it you just stop looking, don't you?

NP: Oh yeah. But it's the little interactions with people that really do reveal a lot more and make places more human in a way because you can just get used to going 'oh that's such a terrible place' or 'I like that place' but not really have a feeling why, maybe subconsciously you're picking up some of these tiny interactions. But the stuff I liked about doing this was how brilliant and beautiful and funny some of these tiny moments are.

SL: I was a bit shocked at how judgmental I am. Even in the thing I just read out I'm saying how pretty people are and I'm making these judgments and even saying 'an Indian family wearing saris.' Well they might be Pakistani and I'm just making these judgements all the time which is then quite exposing if you've it down on paper, and then you think 'God, people are going to think I'm making all of these assumptions.' But then everyone has got their interpretation of what they see, but sometimes it's not always what you want it to be.

DT: I was thinking as well that maybe the biggest challenge when collaborating in a way like this when you're trying to focus very acutely on small details is that you can never be sure that the other person is looking at the same thing, you know? Would you agree with that? Was that a challenge at all or was it just something to embrace and highlight?

NP: I think in this it was about highlighting and embracing that kind of divergence between the two of us really. We'd set out so that Sarah was in different locations at different times so we took up different places and then we would both be in a certain place... We'd agree to meet at a certain place at a certain time, and then to work from there.

SL: I think that's also... When I was saying 'oh Perec was just sat there and he was getting more and more frustrated' I think having those moments like 'oh okay we'll do this session and it will be two and a half hours' and I think actually having those points throughout the day is probably what allowed us to actually keep to the task.

NP: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

DT: And what about the language that you used in order to describe the scenes. Did that change? Oh, I've got a quote from Perec about applying the law of communicating vessels to buses, in that because you're looking at small details he describes buses as being full or empty or you know the way you describe things with your writing, did that change slightly?

SL: Did it change over the process?

DT: Well over the process or just in general from how you would normally write.

NP: I think I was more aware of types of ways to describe something. So, whether it's in sort of speedo or colour or whether it's.

SL: I guess you're reading peoples' body language and the way they're moving themselves because that's pretty much... You've only got clothes to go on apart from how they're actually kind of traversing the space so you do start to think 'okay well how can I give this more life and how can I give this person a bit more validity?'

DT: And you were saying just now that you know you found yourself being quite judgmental and I suppose that comes from superficiality but how else do record what you see?

SL: Exactly! I felt so bad reading out that line where it says 'there's a goth couple and he looks pleased with himself that he has a girlfriend.' That's so horrible. That might not even be his girlfriend.

NP: But the thing is that might be true. But also, I guess this comes back to being with a writer's mind on, you know I think you are also aware that even if it was just me going to read that later then you've got an eye for that at the same time. I mean I'm trying to justify your bigotry.

[Laughter.]

SL: Thanks Nathan.

NP: But there is that tension isn't there. As soon as you start writing and it's a thing, is that the same way you would actually you view something? Probably yes. But you were kind of perhaps exaggerating slightly.

DT: And if you're not going to make a simple log of the 254 heading north, the 254 heading north, the 254 heading north, then you're going to try and describe it in slightly different ways and then it is a challenge. And I suppose that's what Percec's saying. They're longer buses but they're vessels. And I suppose you notice things more like that, you know there are only so many times you can say that a woman walks from right to left.

NP: Yeah, if you'd reduced it down to the way someone... Yeah, direction... I mean there is a difference in language, I think that you said this at some point, I tend to use more words like 'north' and 'south.'

SL: I don't even know which way north is.

NP: So there was a kind of... In terms of space...

DT: When I read your accounts, Nathan, it seemed like you were sitting there with an Ordnance Survey map, the one with the compass built into it, because you were very aware of how.

NP: I think that's generally part of my brain anyway. But then I was also aware of how would you begin? If it's an empty canvas, how do you start? I think that's the start of the first day.

DT: How do you log? You lay out geographically the square, don't you?

NP: Yeah so, I'm also kind of, I suppose, with the hypothetical reader in mind. How do you log the square so that when you read it you might make sense of it?

DT: So that's a difference born of the fact that Sarah you weren't involved in the first day. In the manuscript you are not obligated to describe the scene.

SL: I wasn't setting the scene, yeah.

DT: Yeah Nathan's already set the scene.

NP: But you kind of trusted... You hadn't read any of that.

SL: I asked if I could read Nathan's first day and he was quite strict that I shouldn't. Which I'm glad about now.

DT: But even subconsciously you're entering a project and it's already started and I suppose you don't feel an obligation to explain where you are.

SL: Yeah. And there's less reflexivity, I don't have those.

DT: I mean it's impossible to know but you may have even on the first day not felt obligated to set the scene in any way, you know that's just an interesting difference between the way both of you look at being in a place.

NP: Yeah. I expect there is a difference in the language.

DT: Did the way you observe change over the time that you spent in the square? Did you re-prioritize what you were focussing on in any way? I know you used to... Nathan a very simple thing, you stopped looking at the buses.

NP: I'm not writing bus numbers down.

SL: I think it became almost easier actually because you can kind of compare... Well I only did two days but on the Sunday, there was a different kind of feeling or there was a more casualness or people were more hungover, certain things that you think 'well I've got something to actually compare today with because I had yesterday.' So, it became a bit more rewarding in terms of it feeling like a fuller piece.

NP: I think when you see the same people you might have seen earlier on it sort of becomes.

SL: I love that! When someone would come in and I saw them half an hour ago and they're just walking in the opposite direction looking exactly the same, or they're carrying a bag now and you think it's actually absurd sometimes that someone might be crossing over the square, come back, go back another direction and it just makes everyone look like they're completely... Their lives are a bit meaningless because they're going round in these circles.

DT: It did seem like there were a couple of characters that spend their whole working day pottering about the square in some ways. The delivery drivers keep coming back, that was obviously their route and their patch so they're back and forwards all the time.

NP: And obviously street cleaners and that kind of thing, very much involved in that kind of life.

DT: And I suppose unless you're being quite strict with yourself and sitting yourself down in one spot, those are the things you miss in life, the repetitiveness. Because London can seem quite a random... Well any big city seems completely random because you don't spend enough time to notice that there are any regulars or any locals.

I think you can, especially in Hackney and where I live at Elephant & Castle... It's easy to forget really what they are is just villages within a city and people live locally and their whole lives revolve around the square in the same way that at Elephant & Castle peoples' lives revolve around shopping centre on the roundabout.

SL: Don't you have a... I can't remember what day it is but there's a homeless person who's doing the rounds and they go at the same time to look at the bins and they have certain routes. That's just one example.

NP: There's an elderly woman who appears sort of towards the end of the morning on a route to the bins and then she appears again on Saturday at exactly the same time pretty much. And those are things that, living in a city... You tune out.

DT: And again you speculate as to where she's come from, or does she have a route further outside of the square. That's an interesting thing to then... It's a natural thing, to speculate, but at the same time doesn't really fit in what you're... If you explain the initial idea that won't seem a very relevant point to make but it does in the context of the whole book, it makes a lot of sense as to how that speculation would develop.

NP: I suppose that's the thing, you end up cataloguing your speculations as much as you do your observations and that very much becomes part of the life of the text I think. One of the big differences, talking about language, between this account and Perec's forty years ago, is the amount of adverts and slogans and names of celebrities and brands and you get hammered down with it. I think buses get replaced with just these slogans and Brad Pitt. And that is very much missing... Yes, there are adverts in Perec's, a couple of slogans or the headlines in the newspaper.

DT: It does highlight how overwhelmed we are now with images and signs because you both list a lot of the buses going past with billboard signs on the side, obviously, you've got Hackney Empire which is covered in posters and adverts, and then the bus stops as well.

NP: It's the bombardment and the absurdity, I think, of some of the juxtapositions between what you're sold, or try to be sold.

DT: I think now we've discussed a bit about how your writing styles on this overlapped or differed, we'll take our final reading. Nathan and Sarah are both going to read in tandem.

NP: So this is a part from towards the end of day two I think;

SL: There's a kid in front of me with a pink and purple patterned plaster over her right eye. She wears glasses over it. She takes large jumps across the square, seems unhindered by her sight-based issues.

NP: A white stretched limousine pulls awkwardly in front of the town hall.

SL: A huge white Ford Excursion limousine truck pulls up in front of the town hall. The faint sound of hip-hop music playing inside.

NP: "Oh my days," shouts a small boy pointing at the car.

The limousine reverses twice, trying to avoid the bollards. It ends up facing backwards in front of the steps.

"You disappeared," a man in shades says to the sneezing girl.

The driver of the limousine is listening to drum and bass. Kids gather expectantly on the steps, waiting for a celebrity to emerge from the back of the car.

A people carrier pulls up in front of the limousine. Its bonnet tied with ribbon - four smartly dressed young guys pile out, ties knotted with large knots, pose for photographs next to the limousine.

SL: A people carrier with white ribbon and a bow on its front pulls up, so it is nose to nose with the limotruck.

Two teenage boys, ushers, have their photo taken in front of the limo. An older guy joins them after a few minutes and puts an arm over each of their shoulders.

They are all laughing, squawking. But then go back to pose very seriously each time there is a new photo.

NP: A group of girls dressed in blue, elaborately ruffled dresses, wait their turn for limo photos.

SL: Some girls appear in elaborate blue, flamenco-style dresses. The girls have their photos taken separately, at the furthest-away end of the limo. The boys are looking over, then down at the floor.

NP: One of the excited kids on the steps is wearing a pink eyepatch beneath her glasses.

SL: A man in a flat cap, holding hands with a small boy in a flat cap. Holding hands with an even smaller boy in a flat cap.

NP: The arrival of two more people carriers and a Mercedes – kissing, hugs, handshakes. A palpable excitement.

SL: A man pushes another man in a wheelchair. They stop under the shade of a lime tree. The pusher stands sideways on with his hand on his hip, looking at the limotruck for a long pause.

NP: Hats and headdresses.

SL: The longer he stands there the less sure I am that it is a lime tree.

NP: The father of the bride is wearing a white silk suit, a blue waistcoat and shades.

SL: A young girl, around six. In a tutu, carefully carrying a single blue flower.

NP: The pigeons have disappeared again, earlier than yesterday.

SL: A man shakes her by the hand and she looks pleased. Then he bends over to shake every other child by the hand as they come up the steps.

NP: It's the first time today I've felt warmth from the sun.

SL: A young boy running along the pavement near Mare Street. He's eating a banana and running at the same time.

NP: A guy carrying a ghetto blaster crosses the square from the gym to Stage 3, power cord and plug dangling.

SL: A young usher with a cool, sharp haircut struggles to fasten the bracelet around one of the bridesmaid's wrists.

NP: The girls are taking selfies on the stairs, practised pouts and rehearsed head angles.

SL: Someone notices and squeals, "Aw, look - it's so sweet!"

NP: My disappointment at missing the pigeons leaving for the second time turns out to be unnecessary. They are now all grouped together on the grass, pecking furiously.

SL: Young boy, who can only be three at the most, is wearing a three-piece suit. A teenage bridesmaid tries to take a selfie with the boy, but he won't stay still long enough. She sighs and rolls her eyes. He runs off to shake hands with the handshaker again.

NP: A confusion of weddings - another more traditional wedding party gather at the top of the stairs - the elaborately dressed entourage are posing for a photograph along the length of the limo, alternating boy-girl-boy-girl-boy-girl-boy-girl - the driver pulls off slowly before the photo can be taken.

SL: One of the youngest bridesmaids chases the three-piece suit boy around the steps shouting, "Jeremy – HOLD MY HAND!" again and again. The more she shouts, the faster he runs away. He laughs as he escapes from her. The older bridesmaid who wanted the photo with him says, "Jeremy, please," as if she is about to cry.

NP: A mother with three small children stops, asks me if the bride has gone in yet. The driver overhears and says she is still in the car.

SL: The pastor shakes hands with a plain-clothed wedding guest, who exclaims, "Oh my God."

The girl who works at the gym on the other side of the square stops in her tracks as they are taking a group wedding photo. The boys and girls together now.

NP: Another woman stops, also asks about the bride, adding, “I got married last month.”

SL: She's carrying a twelve-pack of Cushelle toilet roll and shouts, “Where's the bride? I got married last month.”

NP: The wedding party all simultaneously 'ahhhhh'.

SL: The group posing for the photo tell her that the bride is still in the limo.

As they say this, the car door opens and there is an audible gasp.

NP: The bride mounts the stairs, two tiny bridesmaids struggling to hold the train and walk stiffly.

One of the children beside me shouts, “Holy macaroni, she's so pretty.”

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DT: Sorry I was laughing there, I was good enough to try and hide it but it was funny. I was hoping you were going to read 'holy macaroni' because it really made me laugh when I read the book.

NP: Yeah who says 'holy macaroni?' It's like watching too much seventies Batman!

DT: It's really nice that a kid would say it.

NP: Yeah! I mean there are so many beautiful moments and sort of tenderness around that is, as we said, easy to miss.

DT: Unfortunately we've run out of time. I think we should talk again about other things but we've covered enough of the book now. Lastly I should ask if you have any websites or blogs that you want to mention?

NP: Yes. You can find out more about all sorts of stuff I've been up to, it's www.nathanpenlington.com

DT: And that link will be under... I always point down but noone can see, but it will be under this so whatever you're listening to it will be under our voices.

SL: I've got a Tumblr but it's not been updated...

DT: What is this 2008?

SL: I know! I think that's probably the last time I updated it as well! But anyway I'm going to sort it out.

DT: Where can we find this Tumblr? Back in time?

SL: It's sllester.tumblr.com.

DT: S-L-Lester Tumblr.com, is that how they work? Noone knows. It's been so long since I've...

NP: Well that will be a link.

DT: It will definitely be a link because we're not sure!

NP: Because noone knows. I mean if you don't know it then the rest of us have got no chance!

DT: And Nathan Penlington and Sarah Lester's book 'An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in London' is available through Burning Eye Books, and you should check them out anyway because there's lots of really great stuff that has already come out this year. And if I pull my finger out this is going out before Christmas so you can go over to Burning Eye Books and buy lots of books.

SL: It would be a good Christmas present, I've been told, for locals.

DT: It would be an amazing Christmas present. And also get the George Perec one and do a comparison. It was really fascinating reading both, the translation hasn't been out that long has it? Only a couple of years, but it's really good. And what's quite nice about it is sometimes if you read translations you're not sure whether it's been translated very accurately but because of the way he's writing you can remain fairly certain that it's been translated.

SL: The translator's pretty committed. You can tell he's quite poetic himself and has got really involved with it.

DT: Well thanks very much.

NP: Thank you very much for having us.

SL: Thank you.

DT: Bye.

End of transcript.