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[Episode 55: We Should Talk](#) – (January 2016)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: James Harris – **JH**, Paula Varjack – **PV**

Transcript edited by Harriet Foyster – 07/04/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is episode twelve of the Lunar Poetry Podcast. Today I'm in Hackney in East London and I'm joined by Paula Varjack and James Harris, hello both of you.

PV: Hello.

JH: Hello.

DT: We'll start as always with my guests giving an introduction to themselves and we'll begin with James.

JH: Hello. My name is James. I'm thirty three years old and I'm a writer and comedian from Nottingham.

DT: Thank you very much and Paula?

PV: My name is Paula Varjack and I am a... what am I calling myself today?... I am a theatre and video artist and I'm from a lot of places but I've spent most of my life now in London.

DT: And you both have known each other for a little while now?

JH: Yeah well yeah.

PV: James keeps following me from different houses.

JH: Yeah, it's true.

PV: You have to explain that so it doesn't sound totally weird and creepy!

JH: It's quite interesting what people would imagine just from that statement. Yeah, I occasionally pop up in Paula's residence like some obscure fungus. It started in Berlin and Paula... I was sans-domicile-fixe, without a fixed address, and Paula was good enough to lend me her keys for the weekend.

Then you were away a bit longer and I was waiting for an apartment to become free so I stayed in Paula's flat for a little while whilst that happened. And then a while later Paula said that she was going to be hiring out her spare bedroom here. That was over two years ago now. Yeah.

PV: But I came back to London first.

JH: That's true.

PV: You did actually follow me from Berlin.

JH: That's true.

PV: I'm glad you did though!

JH: Yeah, it's been really good.

DT: This episode is going to focus on the idea of peer critiquing or seeking advice from friends or fellow artists in order to develop projects. So I met Paula in the summer when I recorded a series of short extracts from Edinburgh shows and Paula came and very kindly did ten minutes from your show, what was it called again?

PV: [How I Became Myself by Becoming Someone Else.](#)

DT: Yeah. And I, I was going to say typically, yeah typically, gave my opinion on everything and was invited to this group that Paula runs called Invite Only which meets up every month and allows people to pitch ideas and give feedback. We're going to talk about that in a moment but first we'll take a reading from Paula which I believe you first shared at one of these groups.

PV: Yes I'm going to have some assistance from James. There are two lines that don't belong to me.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:06:08]

DT: Thank you very much. I really like that one. Yeah so like I said we're going to start by talking about the group that you run, Invite Only. We should start with the nuts and bolts of it, what the structure is and how often it runs, so Paula if you could start with that.

PV: So Invite Only is a group that I've been running for just over a year now and I set it up because what I wanted was a group of artists of different disciplines who could give feedback to each other around work that they were currently developing and I started it... I started it primarily because I'd been living in Berlin for four years, I moved back to London and I felt like there wasn't really anywhere in the city that felt safe to try things out and kind of to fuck up.

I did find that there was a really healthy workshop scene for performers, primarily in live art, where there was some kind of supportive feedback but then that was always built around exercises that the facilitator wanted to look at from practice. So, I wanted to kind of take that element of that, and often the people I met in those spaces, and create another space where rather than being exercise driven it was just about people in a room that had stuff that they were working on.

It was called Invite Only because I also felt that while the scratch format is quite useful and quite helpful, what I wanted was a space where the feedback wasn't coming from just random people in an audience but it was actually very curated. So everyone in the group is someone that I've met or whose work I'm familiar with and often they come to the group because of the combination of being interested in what they're doing with their practice but also because I'm interested in the way that they give feedback.

DT: So how do the nights or the evening groups work in terms of structure?

PV: So the idea is that we meet for two hours. We... last year we were meeting in the evenings once a month, usually the first Monday or Tuesday of the month from seven thirty to nine thirty. We've recently changed that because some people in the group are better for afternoons and some people are better for evenings, so now we alternate.

But the idea is that there are five slots. The first five people who sign up for those slots get them. It's time to pitch an idea, to perform something, to play or present a bit of something for ten minutes, and then you have ten minutes from the group wherein to give feedback.

The reason it's two hours and the reason there are that many slots is from the first few sessions we kind of found that two hours and five people, twenty minutes each, was sort of around the time that people were still engaged, because it's quite exhausting actually giving feedback and going into different pieces.

Yeah so that's... that's what it is. So, it's five slots, ten minutes to present, ten minutes of feedback each. I'm pretty fascistic about the time slot because it's really important for me that, for example, people earlier on don't end up getting more time and the people the end don't end up getting less time. Often people have to worry about getting across town to go home, so there's always kind of a tension at the end about overrunning for the people going home so I really want to make sure everyone has exactly their slot.

DT: And James you're quite a regular attendee of these groups as well?

JH: Yeah, I mean I don't have too much excuse because it's normally happening in my living room. So, missing it would be fairly bad form. But yeah, I've been to, I would say, I think all of them in some capacity or other.

PV: I think you missed one.

JH: I think I missed one and there was one where I came very, very late. So yeah, I mean I've used... I've given a lot of feedback but I've also used it to show things which I'm working on.

DT: And at the last group, Paula, you talked about the importance of continuity within the group, and maybe you could both talk a bit about how important continuity is as someone that runs an event and as someone that attends an event.

PV: I'm really curious what James has to say. Okay so I think the group has been really successful in that it's still running after a year. I'm regularly getting feedback saying that it's been something that's been really important and useful, it's made new links between... between artists who don't know each other.

That was a key thing for me as well, it's like I wanted a group of people who for the most part didn't know each other outside of the group because I felt that was important. But in terms of continuity I suppose what I initially wanted was a space where people were not just coming because they had something that they wanted to present, but they were

coming because they were actively interested in supporting other artists, giving them feedback.

And what I found is within the group, there's about thirty-five people I think on the list, there's maybe like a critical mass of I'd say six of which I think now you and James are within, who have a pretty good repeat rate of coming back.

For the most part I would say the majority of people in the group for work commitments, life commitments or whatever, tend to come because they have something that they're working on and then don't come again which is completely understandable but one of the things that I want to push this year is to really encourage more of a continuity so that people are coming regardless of whether they're presenting something or not.

Because I think I just feel like it's better for the sake of the feedback if there is a sense of what the development of a project is and also, I'm thinking that in some cases people are going to dip into the group with different stages of a work and it's just better if they don't have to explain what the work is every single time, for example. Over to James.

JH: Well I would say, speaking in my specific case, going back a lot and having a continuity of people is really good for a comedian because if I want to take material in an interesting direction it might not necessarily be safe material. It might be material which is talking about something really difficult or I might just be doing something which is outside of my comfort zone.

For example, I did a character at one of the Invite Only events and it was a really, really good place to start something like that because of the safeness of the atmosphere. So, I think having people come repeatedly is really good because you create an atmosphere where people can try out without any fear that you're going to be criticized in a way which isn't about making the thing better, criticism in the sort of way an audience can give you which is like 'stop doing this thing.'

But that's not necessarily always right because if we listen to audiences when they tell us that every time a lot of the most interesting stuff wouldn't actually get developed. Particularly in comedy where, when comedians go and talk about really dangerous material, I think one of the reasons they're rewarded by an audience is because the risk of them failing is also quite great when they take that subject.

So, I think a group like Invite Only and the idea of getting to know a group of people who know that you're trying stuff out is really important.

DT: There's a big element of trust in that isn't there? [JH: Yeah] Because you're bringing work, presumably, that you would never show to an audience.

JH: Exactly.

DT: And you know you can present it without being destroyed or laughed at for the wrong reasons offstage. And yes, that was the one thing I was thinking about in terms of

continuity, the reason I come as regularly as possible is because then you know who you trust the most, and they're very rarely the people who agree with you are they?

You know it's not people... it's not that you're in a room with everyone telling you you're great. It's nice to build up a rapport with people and to know whose opinions you appreciate amongst them, and who you know will cut through whatever you feel is unnecessary and get to the point.

PV: Because you're right, that is true, there's something about... I mean this is why I think finding peers whose feedback you respect is so valuable because it's about understanding... 'Oh James' bias is maybe a little bit more towards this' or you know... so you go 'oh, okay', I can contextualize what the response is to what I know about them.

But I think the advantage of the group as opposed to people in the group just going to their friends is I brought together people who, for the most part, have met through the group. So from the outset they're able to kind of have like this candid response of talking to someone that you don't know really well and not worrying too much about how it's going to affect the relationship, but then bringing that forward.

DT: How important to your own writing is this kind of sharing with peers and contemporaries?

JH: It's really great for comedy to have a stage which is before getting on stage, although I think any arrangement where people are watching your stuff. I have to say I think probably... because a comedian is looking for something so specific, like a laugh is a laugh, if something isn't getting any laughter, even with eight or ten people in the room it's still a pretty good indicator. But I think it's, yeah... I mean I think for me it's really, really valuable.

PV: I think for me it depends where I am and the stage that I'm at with the work. For the show that I am making right now, [Show Me the Money](#), I'm working with a dramaturg so that is already a very collaborative relationship. My dramaturg Martin Bengtsson... he's my best friend and we've been working together for a long period of time, so I think within the context of where we are with Show Me the Money.

I am not interested in taking that piece where it is now into the group because I've already got this ongoing dialogue with one collaborator and I think I'd just get super confused to throw it out the group. But having it as a space to talk at the very beginning of an idea, at the kind of 'literally I don't even know what this idea is, I'm going to mumble out this half sentence...' is super helpful.

I think I'm also starting to use the group much more as a kind of creative, support group therapy for creatives, which is super useful because everyone is working in different disciplines and the majority of us are freelancers so there are all kinds of questions that come out around negotiation and representation and stuff so that's mega useful.

DT: Yeah. My next question was going to be actually at what stage would you typically share ideas, and Paula you just answered that quite well but James with you... because, like

you said as a comedian, because what you're looking for is a very definite and specific thing, is it more useful for you to pitch very, very early ideas and then just move straight to audiences?

JH: I could use the group... I could present every time to the group and it would be useful for me every time because I've always... If I had a regular slot in the group, 'opening the group this week with the whatever...' Because I've always got some ideas.

I think the main benefit of it is that everyone in the group is so nice and supportive so if you are doing something which is as lonely as comedy, and I don't even mean that in terms of the social aspects of comedy, I mean just the travelling around London and often playing to very empty places, just having a group of people who are all warm and nice is as invaluable as anything. So, it will always be useful at any time to present.

DT: So we are going to take another reading now and it's from James this time.

JH: I'm going to read it from very near the beginning of my novel Midlands which I have finished. I'm going to do a Scottish accent for one of the characters so I'd like to apologise on behalf of the people of Scotland. This is from about the third page of the book so it's very near the beginning. I'm quite excited to read this in front of Paula because it's set in Berlin's central bus station which is a place I believe we both frequented in our time. Okay.

[The author has not approved this extract for transcription.]

[00:23:30]

DT: Thank you very much. I was glad that it was the second guy who was talking who turned out to be Scottish [JH: Yeah that's true!] I thought you were doing a really terrible accent then.

[Laughter]

DT: So in terms of seeking advice from critiquing groups how... did that help you at all in developing a novel?

JH: Not that specific novel but I did work with what in the end was four different people editing the book, which I've been writing for a long time. I thought it was quite pertinent to this discussion because I created a series of editors graded by difficulty.

So, I had a friend of mine who is a very positive individual but also very positive about my writing. So, I would send it to him and he would sort of say 'oh it's great' and correct the spelling, and then it went to the next person, another good friend of mine who was positive but would give me very specific feedback. And then it would go to a man who is incredibly harsh and critical of everything I do and would basically tear it to pieces.

It was this idea of getting it to pass every gatekeeper and then another, Alan who obviously, we know well, came in at the end as a kind of fourth editor with the kind of finished book. So, it was literally once I got the assent from every individual person that I finally submitted the book to a publisher.

DT: Are they all called Alan?

[Laughter]

PV: The four levels of Alan.

JH: Alan could do that. He could play a succession of roles.

DT: Yeah.

JH: But yeah, I mean it really has been a very collaborative writing process.

DT: And actually I hadn't read properly what you were going to read and in terms of the setting, because I wanted to go on and talk about the differences between London and Berlin.

Yeah, I suppose what I wanted to ask you... When you moved, obviously, you both know London, knew London, anyway before you moved back and relocated from Berlin, but this time around were there any major differences that you noticed between the way that creatives share their ideas and develop?

PV: I feel like James should talk first because he came here much more recently.

JH: And I didn't know it, I didn't know it at all. About just over two years now. Well I mean the contrast was really, really strong for me at the beginning. I found... Yeah, I found it really tough and I found that I was in a comedy community in Berlin which was very much a community, very, very collaborative. And you know I enjoyed a certain amount of respect from the other comedians here, and so I was starting out from zero.

But I mean people move to Berlin to be creative, or to live a life where financial issues aren't so great that they can develop their creativity. So, I think... I think there's a lack, a removing of some kind of pressure or competition from that, but at the other end of the scale, because the rewards are smaller and because there's less success for people there, I think that removes some of the competitive element as well.

So, I think Berlin in my experience was very collaborative. That's how we first met wasn't it? Working together on a sketch for a comedy show and that felt very easy, with that kind of collaboration happening all the time.

PV: But a thing I'm curious about, because maybe... have you been more recently than me? Yeah you must've done.

JH: Last time I was in Berlin was coming up to a year ago.

PV: Really? I mean for me one of the differences was it was just much... When we were there before living there it was much easier to just get space. If you wanted to run a night you could just run a night.

And without any profile to talk of there are just so many spaces that you could just go in and say 'yeah I fancy running a cabaret night' or 'I fancy running a spoken word night or a comedy night and there's going to be four or five performers, I'm going to try to sell tickets but this is what I'm doing.' Then the bar would usually just go 'yeah, great' and not even have a conversation about hire fees and then give you drinks tickets for, you know, five or six performers. And then if it didn't even work it would be fine somehow.

It was like as long as there were some people or as long as you and your friends who were doing the night drank after you had drunk your drink tickets, it was kind of okay. I don't think that's... I guess the main thing is just it seems like there was much more room to fail. And there was more space to just kind of try things out. But on the flip-side it seemed like there were less routes to then go from that underground and actually build relationships with major institutions.

JH: I mean for me as a comedian the biggest thing... There were a couple of things I really noticed, the lack of drinks tickets was one of the early ones. I think I've had about four free drinks in my entire time in a year of gigging but I've really enjoyed them. But just the sheer lack of stage time for someone starting in London and what that does is it develops your comedy in a very different way.

Because if you've got a five-minute set and you've got to kind of impress someone in the five minutes well, to be honest, when I listen to clips of myself which I don't do often of my sets in Germany, I'm normally talking bollocks for the first five minutes just trying to get everyone to calm down and you know put their drinks away. I mean that is very hard for a young comedian who is starting out.

Let's say they get their five-minute set and somebody walks through to the bathroom in the middle of their set. That's their five minutes for the evening basically sabotaged you know. So just by dint of that structure you are restricting peoples' creativity in a way because if there's any comedian who wants to do anything really experimental within that five minutes everyone is just going to think 'well they're rubbish.'

PV: But on the flip-side I think you also... I mean, playing devil's advocate I think sometimes it's a bit too easy there, but it's a little bit too unforgiving here.

DT: They are quite opposite, and I was having this discussion today with someone regarding the spoken word scene. I spent a lot of time last year trying to develop sort of the improvised stuff but never had enough time.

Typically, you get four or five minutes in an open mic slot and it would take about three and a half minutes for people to get their head around the fact that I hadn't just wandered in off

the street and sort of just forced my way on to the stage, so there is definitely, I would agree, what does seem like a lack of time to develop things in London. Whereas you're probably right it maybe is too... You've got too much of a free rein perhaps in Berlin to just keep doing what you want and there's perhaps not enough of a focus.

But since we mentioned, or I mentioned, spoken word I wanted to... Since it's called the Poetry Podcast we should talk about poetry in some way. I just wanted to ask do you think that poets and novelists are more guarded than other writers in terms of their work?

PV: Guarded in what sense?

DT: Less inclined to share early ideas.

PV: Oh. What do you think?

JH: I think that novels are very slow to write and...

PV: I don't know why anyone would.

JH: And it's sort of like test cricket or something, it's a long form in a kind of short form world. But I think novels... during the process of writing them they're generally in an awful state because you're trying to fix lots of different parts of this huge thing. So, for example I sent the novel out when I was working on it to a friend and she just absolutely trashed it.

But that feedback was of no use because there was a part of the novel which was just a few drafts further down the line and she said that's really good and the rest of it's rubbish. But of course, because... but I can't give somebody that and kind of preclude what I'm giving them with an apology for how it is.

DT: The reason I paired poets and novelists is because I think in most peoples' minds it's the most solitary form of writing. Perhaps if people go and take themselves away and write in that way...

PV: A novel much more so. I mean I couldn't even imagine writing a novel but I live with two novel writers and I think it definitely... You can wake up in the morning and turn out a poem ten minutes later. I mean of course there could be a revising process. But a novel is really something you... You are separating yourself almost from yourself in a way, going deeper into yourself.

JH: I think what I was trying to get at is that you feel when you've embarked on something of that length that you've just got to get it done and any energy which is detracting from that process of getting it done, i.e. the question 'what is your novel about?'... If the novel is not done you're making a pitch for something which you don't even really know you're going to finish. We don't feel... I mean I've always known that I would finish it because that's just how I am. But yes, I think that's where that guardedness is with writing books.

DT: So if you compare the novelist, for example, to someone who writes for the stage, a playwright, often they'll write in quite a long form and then is it just a cultural thing that there are more workshops involved in that form of writing?

Because it does seem that people who write in that way for the stage are much more open about talking about their ideas in earlier stages of development. I was just wondering whether that's because that form of writing attracts a more open person or whether it's just a cultural thing that already exists.

PV: It's weird because I kind of feel like I've only ever known one screenwriter well enough to have any sense of what that's like but I feel like that has much more in common with what I know of the way novel writers write novels. It seems like much more of a solitary thing. Theatre is a bit different though.

I feel like there is more of a tradition of stage readings, for example, that happen fairly early on in the process, or having conversations between the actors and the playwright with how the text is actually functioning. But I feel like screenwriting and novel writing is much more about someone putting themself away and really needing a lot of solitary time to make it happen.

DT: We, Paula and I, discussed very quickly earlier last week about how this discussion today would go and we touched on briefly... We both have a background in visual arts, and Paula performance art particularly, but for instance we both know a lot of dancers and the sharing of ideas is very common for dancers, the sharing of ideas for performance artists is really common, and I was just wondering, this is open to both of you, how much of that is a cultural thing and just born from the fact that you have to share rehearsal spaces. You know you're on top of each other anyway so is it more natural to chat or whether...?

PV: I don't know if it's about sharing rehearsal spaces, yeah, I remember you saying something like that. I feel like, I don't know, I feel it has more... With performance art anyway or live art, it's a genre that I think has much more awareness of the fact that everything you're making is in relation to something else, in a way.

And of course, people are interested in making something that is distinctive to their voice but I think there is less of an obsession with 'I've made something that no one has ever made before.' It's like 'no I am different from anyone else and my take on whatever I'm making is going to be different for that reason.'

Whereas I think poets... It seems like there's much more conversation within the poetry scene around 'oh I had a piece about that' or 'oh right I wanted to write about that but now they've written about that.' It seems there is much more of a concern about ideas being stolen.

DT: That's sort of how the conversation went the other night. So, James how would you feel about the suggestion that poets are much more caught up on the idea of having something... this idea of having an original piece whereas it seems for performance artists,

because everything is in the context of something else, you can be very open that you've not copied but reinterpreted.

JH: Well nothing is original because we're now like several millennia into human history so we've done everything. The only things we've got are certain small technological innovations which are unique to our time but I don't think they've changed anything essential. So I think it's a bit of a red herring, to be honest.

I mean I can tell you comedians were absolutely obsessed with joke theft and having detailed online discussions about who came up with whatever response. I mean last week it was going around about Bowie and Rickman who both died at 69. Donald Trump is 69 so that was going around but there was a huge argument going on about who had thought of that joke first.

PV: But then there was that Twitter thing, too right? Recently there was this whole thing about comedians talking about people stealing their jokes on Twitter, did you read about that?

JH: I mean I didn't read that specific thing but it's a constant discussion.

DT: Yeah, because I was wondering whether that would be a reason to put people off of coming to discuss their ideas in early development.

JH: Definitely.

DT: Because of this idea that people might steal an idea. You know, I think we're all in agreement that that original idea wasn't their original idea anyway but they were too attached to something.

JH: Yeah, I think it's also like if somebody, whether it's poetry or comedy or whatever form, if somebody has twigged that you are doing something which is similar to what somebody else is doing it's really important how you put that message across. If it's going to be in a friendly kind of way like 'have you seen this person? You might want to look at this.'

But what happens is there's a kind of relish, like people appoint themselves as kind of the joke inspector, and there's a real pleasure. I remember one time I used to do a bit and I came off stage and it was similar to a bit another comedian had, but I'd come up with it myself about five years earlier and I had been doing it all that time and then I saw it much later so I found 'well I can keep doing this thing' and also, I'm working in a different country to the comedian who did it.

But he had come from London and had seen the other comedian doing his bit and I remember just the relish in his eyes, he was literally waiting for me when I came off the stage to say 'have you seen this comedian X?' It's like 'got you, you bastard! You think you can move to Germany, steal this stuff and do it over here?' And I just said to him straight away 'yeah, I've seen the bit, I know it and I know full well that I wrote my joke and I've got more balls because I'm doing it to a load of Germans.'

But that is not the right way for these things to be policed. They shouldn't be policed unless someone is... and what you get is you, kind of, get ganging up on people who've got material which is similar to other people's material and I don't think that's a very nice spectacle really.

PV: But the funny thing is I have to admit I don't really feel... I mean most people I've invited to the group have either come or said 'oh I really wanna come' but they just can't kind of manage it because of time. But I haven't really ever had someone say 'I'm not sure about that'... the thing is maybe they wouldn't say that, I guess maybe they wouldn't say that. No-one would say 'I don't want to join an artist's feedback group because I'm worried people are going to steal my ideas.'

JH: But Gary did say exactly that, remember, to me, about my bit. I have this bit about horrible open mic comedians. And he was like 'oh someone's done a whole Edinburgh show about this' so, it goes.

PV: Yeah but that's not the same as 'I don't want to join an artist's feedback group because I'm scared people will steal my ideas.'

JH: No, no it's not.

PV: I think what's more common is... I very often... Because I'm a real big one for sharing open calls and artist's opportunities and stuff, and often... I have a handful of friends who often will respond to some of them and say 'I don't know, I think this is just, like, [inaudible] trying to steal some ideas or something.' And maybe that happens, maybe I'm just super naive but I don't buy that.

DT: Also I think James is completely right. We all experience the same culture. Some of us are more open to popular culture than others. But essentially the same news events happen around us and we are all exposed to the same media, if you live in one country, and it's natural to have the same ideas. Like that thing about Donald Trump, of course everyone's going to come up with that same idea.

He's been on the front page of every newspaper for the last five months or something, you know, and it's very common to have the age next to it, to make that leap from 'these are two people that have died at 69 that we would rather not have died just yet' to 'who's the asshole that we'd all wish would fuck off next.' It's not that difficult to make that leap.

PV: We're all taking... we're all taking the same reference points. So, it's not unusual that some of the same conclusions are going to come.

DT: Do you find it unusual... with that all being said do you find it unusual, with spoken word in particular, that there isn't more general knowledge and that more work isn't put into the same context that performance artists... [**PV:** general knowledge of?] Sorry the history of what...

PV: The thing is it's such a nebulous genre because if you were literally saying spoken word I mean what is it? It can be everything from early lyrical poetry, and then are we talking about it going back to the Greeks? Are we talking about early African storytelling which often has a kind of lyrical content or is it related to chance or...?

DT: Just one point... There are a lot of spoken word poets who wouldn't even be able to make that point that you just made. Like what context are you going to put it in? Because that shows quite a deep knowledge of what the art form is. Just by being able to wonder what context you should put it in.

PV: That's because there's next to no critical writing and engagement with what it is. What it is in terms of what we call it now is pretty, pretty young and even within that I think for most young poets spoken word is what they can find on YouTube, so even people who are from the nineties... it's like who are they? Because they don't have a YouTube presence. How can you then reflect on it?

And I think that's the danger with cadence as well because of this obsession with trying to figure out what is a spoken word piece other than just someone talking or MCing or it could be comedy or it could be song lyrics with a backing track, becomes like 'we don't know what it is.' Well one way we can define it is say 'we're all going to use these vocal rhythms and that's what makes it spoken word' which maybe is really dangerous.

DT: Yeah.

PV: I think it could do... I think what communities... I wouldn't say there's a single... Communities that exist around it could do with a little bit more critical reflection.

DT: Well this is my point. The whole reason I started the podcast was to have a wider critical discussion about what was being made. Because it's not until you start that, do you try and define what something might be and it's not before... you can't put anything into context unless you've defined something, can you really? So perhaps all of these things... And it's a fair point that maybe if I'm talking about spoken word it may be, as a popular art form, too new to have been put into context in that way.

PV: But there are literally only like three books on spoken word that are all American, nothing really has been written here yet. It's so annoying I can't remember one of them. But the thing that really stuck with me from a book is the woman who wrote it was talking about how the early poetry slam organizers... When poetry slam became a national form in America...

So, it was happening all over the country, which is what national means [laughs], there was a sense that you had the national slams which is where everyone met each other and you'd have a team from all the different cities and that would be where you have a sense of what was happening across the country. So, there was that. But then the point of that was that when the organizers went back to their respective cities they would have this kind of visionary approach to how they program the feature acts for the monthly events.

Which meant that, for example, if they felt 'oh it's getting a little bit too like silly comedy, no message, every single month, it's good but we could do with a little bit more grit and politics in it,' they would go 'okay we're going to book these guys that we saw from New York because they had a really interesting message' as a way to kind of show the people in their local scene 'alright this is what seems to be naturally happening where we live but this is a way to open your eyes generally' and so on.

Maybe people in New York would be like 'oh we're getting a little bit ranty, we could do with a bit of humour so we're going to book that woman who won from Oakland.' And I think... I think more of that could be happening, like a more sort of visionary approach to booking features which isn't just about 'oh I've seen them and they're a name and they're good enough,' but like 'oh actually what does our local scene need? What are the kind of stories that are missing? What are the thematics that are missing? What are the tones that are missing?'

DT: I think there's definitely a void within spoken word which could be filled by some sort of curation of events. Is that what you were getting towards as well?

PV: I don't want to disrespect it... So many of my friends are organisers I don't want to disrespect that.

DT: No, no but I put myself in that... Along with Lizzy we ran a night for over a year and I put myself in that position. You know there was a lot more we could have done in order to make sure that event was diverse, and I mean more diverse in the types of acts that were on. We had limitations in that we had no budget. We could only put on people who were willing to come for free and on the nights that were available. But I'm definitely in that category myself, I mean I would have liked to have made more of an effort to... It sounds arrogant to say to expose our regular audience members to a different kind of poetry than they would normally see, but it shouldn't be arrogant. I think that's the point of putting a night on.

PV: But then you also...

DT: If you're booking features, sorry, if you're running an open mic night you can't do anything about that.

PV: Yeah but on a business level you also kind of have to then make your promoting model... Also, you have to kind of build into it... 'Okay well if I'm going to build a night, for example, that relies on regularly having features from out of town then it can't be an unpaid night.'

Then already I have to work into it 'I'm going to build a night where I need to have a minimum of fifty quid which, say if it's a London artist, is an okay fee, but if it's someone out of town at least I can say 'sorry we can only really cover your travel.' It demands planning much further advance because in order to get a ticket that's cheap enough where you can get a return for that fifty quid as far as you can go, you're going to have to book it two or

three months in advance. But it's all possible, it's just you have to... It just takes a bit little more work. That's all I can say of that.

DT: I think we'll end on that note. We've spent enough time talking about that. So maybe we could just finish up with what you're both up to next, what you've got coming up, James?

JH: I've got very little coming up.

PV: That's not true!

JH: I'm going to perform in the eighth country I've performed in until now.

PV: You've got anything and everything.

JH: Yeah 'il coño.' Apparently, that's what the headliner is known as in Spanish, which apparently is 'the turd' which I think is much better than headliner. Yes, so I'll be in Madrid and I've got a hell of a lot of gigs coming up in February and March.

PV: What are you doing on the thirteenth of February James?

JH: Well, I'm making an appearance in an event called [The Anti-Slam](#) which I very much enjoy.

PV: I'll let you say what it is, because I feel like...

JH: The Anti-Slam is an evening of bad poetry and each part has to compete to be the worst. I'm actually there in the capacity as a scorekeeper and the Valentine's Day Anti-Slam is already a fixture.

DT: Is that in the Hackney Picturehouse?

JH: Yeah, it's in the attic.

DT: In the attic of Hackney Picturehouse. And if people want to check out what dates you're going to be on?

JH: Well go to my Twitter, because I link up everything there. [@JamesHarrisNow](#).

DT: We'll put the link under the video, do you have a blog?

JH: Yeah you can read my blog, at [shoeleatherexpress.org](#) and please do.

DT: And Paula, what's coming up?

PV: The next thing coming out... I got in trouble for not mentioning something recently so I have to think it through... Next week I will be in Exeter and I'm looking at Google Calendar to see what date it is! On Monday the twenty fifth. If this podcast is out by then!

DT: Yeah. If not, bad luck!

PV: I'll be running a workshop in the afternoon, if you're in Exeter, if you happen to be listening to this in Exeter, I've also got the Anti-Slam, which I'm co-hosting. I'll be in Manchester on the ninth February for an event called Outspoken which is a queer arts festival and it's their spoken word night with Keith Jarrett and AJ McKenna, and on March eleventh will be the preview of Show Me the Money at Rich Mix.

Everything is [Paula Varjack](#), I'm the only Paula Varjack on the internet, Paula is obviously Paula, Varjack is like car jack with a 'V', and I have a blog where I'm writing lots of stuff about art and money, and it's [Show Me the Money](#) but the 'e' in money is a '3', like the kids do, dot tumblr dot com.

DT: Thank you very much both of you. You can follow us on @Silent_Tongue on Twitter, I'll be retweeting and all that shit. Thank you, James.

JH: Thank you.

DT: Thank you Paula.

PV: Thank you.

DT: Good luck with the future and all that.

End of transcript.