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### [Episode 68: Speaking Volumes](#) – (April 2016)

Transcript edited by David Turner – 14/03/2017

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: Sharmilla Beezmohun – **SB** & Sarah Sanders – **S**

#### **Conversation:**

**DT:** Hello. My name is David Turner and this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. Today I'm in Camden in north London and I'm joined by Sharmilla and Sarah, the co-founders of the fantastic [Speaking Volumes](#). Hello to the both of you.

**SB:** Hello.

**S:** Hi.

**DT:** We're going to start with an introduction into what Speaking Volumes is and Sharmilla is going to talk us through that.

**SB:** Yes, Sarah and I met when we were both at [PEN International](#), working at the events team, doing the Free The Word Festival and we'd actually both been working in literature for a long time and managed to never meet until that point. So, we met and hit it off very well, immediately and we organised two festivals together at PEN. But, after two festivals, I think we both felt that we'd had enough of working for other people.

We had so many ideas of our own and wanted to just follow our passions and our interests in literature. So, we both left PEN and decided to set up Speaking Volumes. We had a few small jobs first. For example, we organised a Russian poetry night that was an outreach event for the London Book Fair Market, and a couple of other things.

Before [Poetry Parnassus](#) started in 2012, which was part of the cultural olympiad, we were invited to see if we could help out with that. So, we set-up Speaking Volumes as a partnership, and we have all the legal documentation of everything and it's all very exciting exciting. Even a tax number, everything. So, our first job was this massive, UK tour of Poetry Parnassus poets.

So, Poetry Parnassus was a very exciting festival where the South Bank [Centre] invited one poet from every country in the world to come to London for a week to do events. Then we organised, over two-and-a-half weeks or so, wasn't it?

**S:** Yeah, it was nearly three weeks.

**SB:** We used about fifty poets from that gathering to do bespoke events all over the country. I think we organised about thirty different events from Northern Ireland to Edinburgh to Cambridge, right down to the south coast. So, it was three weeks of swapping poets at obscure stations and curating according to each venue's needs or each festival's needs. It was amazing, wasn't it?

**S:** Yes. It was incredible, I was remembering the other day, one of the particular poet swaps. I think it was at Paddington Station, there were two of us in charge of maybe about thirty poets and who only three of which spoke English. Some of them had translators, some didn't. Half of them had lost their tickets. It was an experience but it was a brilliant one and I think that really set us up to be able to deal with anything.

**DT:** It brings to mind images of Primary School teachers trying to get kids in 'high-vis' vests, onto double-decker busses without losing any.

**S:** That's it! But we were shouting across the train station. "Where's Mr Korea?", "You've lost Miss Cameron! Where's Miss Cyprus?" It was interesting.

**SB:** Yes, I was at Bristol, Temple Meads Station waiting for poets to come from London that I hadn't met him before, so I was looking at... I knew 'Mr Armenia' was quite an old gentleman so, I was looking at every old man that came towards me, thinking, are you 'Mr Armenia'?

**DT:** Looking out for white carnations in lapels?

**S:** Exactly! And who spoke no English at all.

**SB:** But it worked really well, I mean, I think all three of us... We have a colleague, Nick Chapman who was also at PEN as our colleague on the festival team. He joined us soon afterwards. So, all three of us were in a state of almost comatose, watching of the Olympic Games, after that tour. I think I watched every weird sport going because I couldn't move off the sofa.

**S:** It was certainly a baptism of fire but we realised that having worked in literature for many, many years that that was the kind of project where we were able to bring all of our skills to that. Both organisational and editorial in the case of Sharmilla.

**DT:** So, Speaking Volumes, was it a reaction to anything in particular? Or was it just a chance to focus on something different?

**SB:** I think it was two things really, wasn't it? One is that, Sarah and I feel that often a lot of literature programming in this country might not be as audience-focussed as maybe it should be. And we got a bit tired of seeing, four white middle-class men on stage and we wanted to.; 'A', show that literature is much more diverse than that. But 'B', also show that you could interest people who aren't seen as your usual literature audience... In books, in events, just by putting some work in and doing some research and actually knowing what you doing.

**S:** And I think programming in partnership with venues who really do know their audiences [helps]. Whether it's at the British Library or a festival up North or... I think [Wenlock Poetry Festival](#), is happening at the moment, which is brilliant. We really wanted to work with people, like that and to learn about their audiences and to really, properly tailor events for their audiences as opposed to...

Quite often when people tour the country, with poetry particularly I have to say, there's a sense that the curated program or the set of curated writers is fixed. And that [idea], just like a theatre production, I suppose, tours around the country and that's fine. But in terms of audience development and interesting more people in poetry changed and a much wider audience, that's not going to work. So, we always give ourselves extra work, if you like, whenever we're doing [tours].

**DT:** Without naming names, because there's no point when people aren't here to discuss it, there have been a couple of events recently that I've been to. They were at venues that I go to generally anyway. On both occasions, I've asked what will be happening at the event to the people working at the venue and they've just said, "I don't know. It's just been

booked". There's been no attempt, it seems, to find out who might be coming, how you can work with the venue to draw in their regular customers, if it's a bar or whatever; or to just bring in their regular visitors.

Because, I think people forget, if you visit a place regularly and suddenly there's an event out of the blue, a lot of people will choose not to go. Won't they? You won't necessarily get the regulars, they might say, "I don't know what that is. That's not part of my regular experience in that space. It's not for me. I won't go tonight." And that seems as though that thinking would extend into touring programs, you know.

**SB:** I think, as well, because we work with a lot of writers who are from abroad and who come over [to take part], we make the effort to reach those communities in the UK. You know, there are so many different communities and cultures in Britain and these days with the Internet it doesn't take too long to find, you know, newspapers or local radio programs which might cater to different cultures.

That's what we do when we put out our publicity. For example, when we had the 'Russian Poetry' night, we had a lot of Russians actually coming to the event who live in London because we had taken the time to approach the Russian media in London, local radio stations in London etc.

**S:** I think one of the things that we have been frustrated about in the past is that, if you are a book lover and you have, fairly, mainstream taste and a bit of money, particularly in this brilliant city of ours. You are well catered for, there are a lot of venues and a lot of great programmers putting on writers who will sit and talk and poets who will sit and talk and read their work.

We are less interested in that, in the long term, in that we wanted to represent perhaps voices who were not represented more widely in the mainstream. Whether that's, you know, the brilliant Black-British writers we took to the States or through [Stand Up and Spit](#), with the poet Tim Wells. That's looking at the resurgence and celebration of working-class poetry.

**DT:** If it's not too distracting, I'd rather no one mention Tim Wells. He's getting too many shout-outs. [LAUGHTER FROM ALL] And it's all far too positive towards his work.

**S:** He's an absolute diva!

**DT:** Yeah, one thing I've always felt with events that Speaking Volumes put on... You seem to be very aware of your obligation towards participants, in that, if you invite someone you should promote them properly. Your obligation lies as much with your 'panel' or your readers as much as it should your audience. It should be more... Am I going to say the word 'holistic'? Is that coming out of my mouth?

**S:** You just did!

**DT:** Perhaps I should say that you have to look more roundly at the whole thing. And speaking of... Get ready for this, this is professional... Speaking of your live events, I attended the [Breaking Ground](#) reading at Waterstones on Picadilly, which I think was the first time I became aware of the Breaking Ground project. Now your latest project is taking the Breaking Ground project on tour in the US, maybe you could give us a brief description of what the project is as a whole and we can talk about the tour after.

**SB:** Sure. Breaking Ground was an idea that I'd had for ages and kept nagging Nick and Sarah about. I'm part of a project called [Afro Europes](#), which is basically looking at the Black-European population right across the continent. Although, it's an academic project we also, always have cultural programmes and it's one of the funnest academic projects you could ever want to be on. Including dancing etc.

We had an Afro Europe's conference in London in 2013 and had a great number of people come from both Europe and the States. We did cultural nights, every night and it was really interesting to discover that a lot of the American academics didn't know any of the Black-British writers we were putting on stage. This included people who I would have thought were quite mainstream names, you know Bernadine Evaristo or Colin Grant.

It was quite a shock. So, Sarah and I talked to a couple of the American academics, who we are very good friends with, and we told them of our idea to bring some Black-British writers to the States and they said, "Yes, we will support you in this. It really needs to happen". So, that was 2013 and it took us two years of writing hundreds of e-mails and trying to get funding, from all sorts of places, to get enough money together to really do something.

The first iteration of Breaking Ground happened last autumn. We were able to take nine writers to the U.S. for... I think it was about ten events over eight days, including doing a massive showcase at conference called, ASWAD; The Association for the Study of Worldwide African Diasporas in Charleston, South Carolina. Where all of the writers performed and had [an audience of] nearly two-hundred people who gave a standing ovation at the end.

The writers performed in Rutgers in Chicago, then Pittsburgh and Atlanta, so it was a lovely visit. They got to meet students, academics, other writers, publishers and all had a great experience. Even people who were top academics in the U.S. did not know them. Quite a telling little thing which happened was Bernadine Evaristo and Jay Bernard did talk Rutgers University to the African-American Course and Africana Studies. There were probably about a hundred students in the room, so we started off by asking them how many famous Black-British people they knew, not even writers and they could barely name five.

So, then there was this, kind of, knowledge that came out that basically they didn't even really know there were black people in Britain. [**S:** Sounds insane!] And a lot of them were studying post-colonial history, for example. Well you know, Britain should play some part.

**DT:** It has a bit of a role there, doesn't it?

**SB:** So, that's how Breaking Ground started and we decided that, on another day, we could have chosen another ten writers in a heartbeat and another ten and another ten! So, we also decided to, not just promote those ten writers who we were taking on tour but to produce a booklet which featured fifty Black-British writers and again we could have chosen another fifty.

**DT:** Yes, something I really liked about the project, when I found out about it at the reading, was that it wasn't the usual thing of some sort of prize giving. It wasn't like, "We've made a long-list, a short-list and here are the best three writers of this year". It does seem like a genuine attempt to show how many people...

**S:** We had to be really brave and it was quite concerning because any list, any prize will always leave people off. And as Sharmilla says, we could have done another booklet with another 50 brilliant writers in. We tried to mix it up between, you know, not everyone is published, there are spoken word artists in there. Memoirists, crime writers. So, we did have to be brave and it was quite scary. The last thing we wanted to do was to create bad feeling by including some and excluding others and, touch wood, I don't think we have.

**SB:** Yeah, we were very aware that we wanted to show the diversity that exists, not just in the writing but age groups, backgrounds etc. You know, there's a quote from Bonnie Greer in an interview she gave for [Wasafiri](#) where she says, "Britain's strength, in terms of its Black population, is the fact that it's really diverse" and people make this mistake of always looking to America... You know, when events happen or whatever, to look at what's going on in Black politics there but the populations are very different.

You know, African-Americans have been in America by and large as a large population for several hundred years. Britain's Black communities come from such a different range of locations or different experiences, but that's a real strength and a very interesting thing. But people don't tend to take that into account.

**DT:** As much as I loath to talk about him but Tim [Wells'] project and blog, Stand Up and Spit is a really good example of the early influences of immigration over literature in this country. And the continued influences because, obviously... Especially in London, it wasn't one event where a load of new people arrived. It's always been staggered with different groups from different parts of the world came at different times. And they influenced all kinds of things in amazing ways so check out his blog.

**S:** One of the things that was really interesting for many of us was to talk to the audience after the big Charleston event. Where, there wasn't just a standing ovation, there was this... I can't really describe it... This, sort of, swell of feeling that something really special had just happened. And Warsan [Shire] did a special recording for us and her face was on these three massive screens down the side of the room and it was amazing.

But in talking to people afterwards, they were... Again, academics, people who studied, people who one would have thought would know this stuff, were amazed at the diversity and the backgrounds. The mixed backgrounds of the nine writers on stage. So, Gabriel, for example, and stood up and said that he's Nigerian-Jewish-Irish.

**SB:** South Londoner.

**S:** Indeed.

**DT:** He's a Vauxhall boy, isn't he?

**SB:** Yes.

**S:** So, with this mix of skin colour and background and accent.

**SB:** And culture.

**S:** Absolutely and it works and it's a tribute, I think, to Sharmilla's programming when you saw everyone sitting up on that stage. It really came together and I think I properly understood what you've been banging on about all this time! And you got it absolutely right and certainly the audience felt that.

**DT:** Are there anymore Breaking Ground events lined up for the U.K.?

**SB:** Yes, actually, we went to the U.S. in the autumn and we're just back now. As we speak, Bernadine and Colin should be waking up to... Separately! [LAUGHTER] Separately but in the same town, to prepare for their N.Y.U. reading this lunchtime. We'll also be in California all of next week, doing readings and events in Davis University of California. [INAUDIBLE]

We're also sending six guys to the prison that used to be called Folsom Prison to do writing workshops. Then we come back on the 22nd of June [2016], we're going back to Waterstones on Picadilly and we're going to have an evening of chat about what happened. Their experiences, a bit of video because Nick will be doing lots of lovely filming in the States with all the writers and a little bit of audio thrown etc.

It's just going to be, kind of, an evening of celebration but also telling people what's been going on. It's going to be introduced by Hirsh Sawhney who is a south Asian writer who lives in New York but has got a lot of links with the U.K. His first novel has just come out with [Akashic Books](#). It's a coming-of-age novel about a young south Asian boy in New York and it's a really nice way to show the links between all these different international communities as well.

**DT:** Akashic Books seem to be doing some really great stuff. I got to hear about them through [Kayo Chingonyi](#) who had a pamphlet out through them and I interviewed him recently. They seem to be doing some fantastic work, it's a shame they're so far away because I'd like to chat to them. [INAUDIBLE] I'm assuming that most of my listeners live in Britain but can they follow the U.S. tour?

**S:** They can do that on Twitter through the #BreakGround. [INAUDIBLE] And also through our website so if you go on to the Speaking Volumes website we have lots of video and you can follow us through that. [INAUDIBLE]

**SB:** [www.speakingvolumes.org.uk](http://www.speakingvolumes.org.uk).

**S:** Yes, thank you.

**SB:** And also Facebook, we've had lots of stuff going up every day about all the different writers and as events happen we'll be putting more stuff up. So, some of the writers have agreed to do some live Twitter interviews, as well. So, yeah, it's pretty much going to be documented as we go along, as I say, Nick is going to be doing some filming... Not just of the authors reading at events, but hopefully some nice, beautifully sunlit, warm walks in California. Sort of chatting etc.

**S:** You know, she's only saying all this because I'm not going. [LAUGHTER] I'll be managing Stand Up and Spit, the U.K. tour where we'll be going to Salford and Leicester.

**DT:** Yeah, you're going to the north-west of England. You'll be fine!

**S:** Exactly, my spiritual home and in fact my original home.

**SB:** Well, you would still be wearing your thermals in California.

**S:** There was a day on Suns Island when we were being shown around and it was 80-odd degrees and I was wearing a cardigan and thick tights and they were all laughing at me. I'm a Northerner.

**SB:** I have to say, that when we went to Charleston it was a real experience because it had only been a few months since the shooting had happened in a church in Charleston. To then take nine Black-British writers to that town which has such, obviously, resonance right from the beginning of slavery in the States. I think they were all very moved in different ways by just being there and walking around and feeling the vibes and stuff.

**S:** They wrote some incredible blog posts, as well, that... They're all on our website... Going back to what you were saying earlier about the writer's experience being really important to us, that's something we work very hard at. And we, particularly, for Breaking Ground go back to them all the time and we want to... You know, they're the writers, they're 'the window' for the rest of us to experience these things.

**DT:** That's what seems quite brave as well, about, rather than doing a prize giving... Which is, for the organisations, whichever way you look at it, it's always an act of self-promotion as an organisation. [INAUDIBLE] It's a really refreshing way of looking at the whole project. I suppose that's worth mentioning to the listeners, you'll get as much out of following the individual writer's blogs, won't you? As to what the project is supposed to be.

**SB:** And I think, as well, things that we discovered were that the ten writers that we put together, some of them didn't know each other or any any of the writing they'd been doing. Since the first visit, not only have they formed friendships but they've been doing things together and collaborating. They've also had really and different experiences of reaching out to the U.S. contacts that they've made.

Some people [involved] have written for U.S. magazines and have been in touch and done classes with students coming to London etc. So, it's been kind of like watching at a party where you've introduced a load of people that don't know each other. They all get on and you see all these lovely friendships developing.

**S:** Absolutely, we have future plans to do a third visit back to the U.S. Because from when we started... In the four months since we last went to the States the writers have got more work, we've been asked to take more writers over. You know, there is a legacy to this, this isn't just a one-off visit. Our future plans are to take Breaking Ground to Europe, obviously Europe is a large place, so it will be to four different countries in Europe and expanding the number of writers that have the opportunity to do this. And that's something we're really really excited about. We need to wait and see if we get funding, etc for it.

**DT:** Have you got any plans in place to combat Beyonce trying to steal your thunder by sampling young Black-British writers? [LAUGHTER]

**S:** I don't think we really have anything to worry about, I don't think anyone has really heard of Beyonce. [LAUGHTER.]

**SB:** Who?

**S:** Exactly!

**SB:** She's just jumped on the bandwagon.

**DT:** Absolutely! It's something you've started which she's got her eye on.

**S:** She's watching us for the next thing. The next thing will be her stealing our fashion. [INAUDIBLE] I mean it's exciting. It's so exciting for Warsan! She's just an extraordinary performer, you know, to have her as part of Breaking Ground is fantastic. And the other thing, we haven't said, actually is that a lot of the writers of course are published... Not all of them but some of them are published by the smaller independent presses who, as we've just discussed, often do the most interesting stuff.

**S:** Warsan is currently published by [Flipped Eye](#), as is [Nick Makoha](#), so it's a great opportunity for us to also promote independent British publishers abroad. In a way that they wouldn't necessarily have the capacity to do themselves.

**DT:** It's an amazing piece of timing that, just before the tour, someone involved with the project is getting so much attention. And Warsan definitely deserves it.

**S:** Absolutely, as does Neil Parks at Flipped Eye, I hope he's re-printing.

**SB:** He did say, in his very nice New York Times interview, that he would anticipate that there's going to be more demand he. But I think, you know, on a serious note all of the stuff that we do easily shows that diverse literature is really saleable, exportable, marketable etc. And the publishing industry, if you like, in this country needs to pay attention to the fact that stuff works.

**DT:** Well that's the thing. Anyone that does a little bit of looking around and trying to read different stuff, wouldn't be at all surprised that someone of the quality of Warsan got picked up. There's no surprise there because it's fantastic writing. It's only if you don't really pay any attention that you might wonder why. [I was reading something] That must have been added by a sub-editor about being shocked at the prolific amount she was writing. But that's because you've ignored this person for six years, just because you don't know who they are doesn't mean that it's surprising that they've written a lot.

But that goes for so many writers, you could go on all day naming writers that deserve attention. I'm just a bit conscious of time so, obviously through Twitter and through your website people can follow the project and the tour as it's going along and then find the names of the people on the tour and then follow their blogs. So, there is lots and lots going on.

**SB:** Yes, and then come and see the event on the 22nd of June and see what we did in the States.

**S:** That's free, isn't it? Thanks to Waterstones.

**SB:** And there will be wine!

**S:** What a shock! [LAUGHTER]

**DT:** But aside from Breaking Ground, maybe we could wrap up with talking about any other projects that you've got coming up or that are already underway?

**SB:** So, Sarah has been taking care of some lovely gigs all around the country that are going to be happening over the summer with a lot of Ranting poets, old and new.

**S:** We've linked up with some brilliant promoters, all over the country, from Bradford Literature Festival to the [Evidently](#) guys in Salford, The Liverpool WOW Festival, Find The Right Words etc. Then on the 9th of July, we were asked by The Roundhouse to put together a day of Punk-Ranting poetry crossover loveliness. So, we're doing that on the 9th of July. We've got everyone from Danny Fields, Linton Kwesi-Johnson, Dennis Povell, Phil Jupitus, Sophie Cameron, Rhoda Dakkar, Salena Godden... Just loads of really great people. That's an event that we're really looking forward to.

**DT:** I can remember chatting to Tim [Wells] months ago and the idea of developing a tour was coming up and now to see dates being added all the time and amazing poets.

Going back to the Stand Up and Spit thing which was at Camden Town Hall last year, it's a good show isn't it?

**SB:** Yes.

**DT:** You've got some really good performers there, not just writers.

**SB:** Yes, Sarah's worked really hard, as well, to ensure that it is all over the country. It's a real spread of places, you know, which is what we've wanted to do for ages. So, it's really good to see it happening.

**DT:** Well, it's nice to go back to the root of Ranting because it was never really a London thing it was always...

**S:** Absolutely. We're trying to get gigs at the moment in... The scene was huge in Hull, for example. So, you know, we're talking to Swift Nick up there who was one of the originals... To not go to an Arts Centre but to try and find some of these places where, you know, this is happening. You know, the thought of poetry in a pub now or people just standing up in amongst 'normal' people, not a hipster pub is slightly bonkers, I can't quite get my head around it.

**DT:** Yeah, we did it recently in The Good Intent which is on East Street Market off of Walworth Road [south London]. I mean, that area is changing, it's becoming the hipster hell which London is quickly becoming all over. But The Good Intent Still is still a proper pub and they have an open-mic night which just includes people with acoustic guitars.

**DT:** We got up and did some poems and it was just... It was pretty tense! People in there didn't really want it to be happening and we had some shouting. I suppose that's how Ranting developed, in one way, you are forced to project a lot more because you haven't got a captive audience. You haven't actually got an audience, really.

**S:** Exactly and going up before Punk bands and getting bottles thrown at your head and spat at.

**SB:** I think, Linton [Kwesi-Johnson] said, something about, when he opened for a number of punk bands and stuff in the 70s doing his poetry. Yeah, some of the audience reaction was similar to that.

**S:** I can't imagine Linton taking that. 'The scowl'...

**SB:** You take, you know, all sorts of audience reactions, don't you? I don't know what's worse?

**DT:** You'd have to be a brave person to throw something at Linton as a younger man.

**S:** Even now!

**DT:** Especially then, he seemed a pretty intimidating on stage.

**S:** He's still completely captivating.

**DT:** I was holding the memory of him reading Michael Smith's [poem](#) at the Stand Up and Spit gig, I've not seen so many poets that like to have an air of bravado about them just fall to pieces.

**S:** That was a real moment. So, we're doing as many Stand Up and Spit [gigs] as we can and long may that continue. Tim's blog, just has the most extraordinary amount of...

**SB:** Who?

**S:** Tim Wells, have you heard of him? [LAUGHTER]. The most extraordinary amount of hits, it has a really huge audience for this kind of work. So, we're going to continue to do that. We're hopefully doing a project with the brilliant John Hegley, around some of his children's work. [Something] we haven't quite planned out yet, but the producer of the original Michael Smith, Arena film in the 80s...

**S:** We put that on last year, again as part of Stand Up and Spit, at The [BCA](#) in Brixton but the producer and director who basically still has all these incredible films that he made over a really long period. Has, basically, offered to us to use many of these, though we haven't quite thought about what we're going to do with them yet.

**SB:** It's timing issues because we, all three of us, do this part-time so we've got loads of ideas but we don't have enough hours in the day to do them. But in the autumn, as well, one thing we are working on is that there's going to be a celebration of the 50th anniversary of Guyanese independence. So, there's going to be a lovely evening of poetry and music at Sennet House with Keith Waite and John Agard, Grace Nicholls and Malaika Booker just celebrating that. So, that's a nice little contained event.

**SB:** It's also the 50th anniversary of the Caribbean Artist's Movement which, you know, was a visual arts movement that brought together all different artists from across the Caribbean in London. So, we're hoping to get some really nice images from some of the artists to use as backdrops, as well, just to show how these things are never in isolation.

**DT:** Brilliant, I think we may have run out of time but it has been really nice chatting. So, all links to the Twitter stuff and the website, I will put in the description for this recording so you can just click and find the links. And check out Speaking Volumes.

**S:** I hope that was alright.

**DT:** It was perfect, thank you very much.

**End of transcript.**