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[Episode 97: Rachel Long; Raymond Antrobus](#) – (17/04/2017)

Transcribed by David Turner – 15/04/2017

### **Introduction:**

Producer: David Tuner – **DT**

**DT:** Hello this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I'm David Turner. How are you lot doing? Well I hope. Today's episode is in two parts, with me talking to Rachel long and Raymond Antrobus.

But before we hear from those two I just wanted to remind everyone that there is still time to vote for us in the Saboteur Awards, [Best Wildcard](#) category. Just go over to [www.sabotagereviews.com](http://www.sabotagereviews.com) and follow the links to Saboteur Awards and their voting form,

do that before April 30th. And if voting is your thing then you can vote for us as your favourite podcast in the [British Podcast Awards](#) by going over to [www.britishpodcastawards.com/vote](http://www.britishpodcastawards.com/vote) and entering Lunar Poetry Podcasts. And I will love you forever.

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Onto the episode. First up I'm talking to Rachel Long who is a poet and facilitator for Barbican Young Poets and leads the Octavia Collective based at the South Bank Centre in London. We talk about her work as a facilitator and the effect that has on her writing practice and our shared aversion to social media. Here's Rachel.

### **Part one:**

Host: David Turner – DT

Guest: [Rachel Long](#) – RL

RL: [Hotel Art](#)

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

**[03:33]**

DT: Thank you very much Rachel. How are you?

RL: I'm good thank you.

DT: Thanks for joining us.

RL: No, thank you for having me.

DT: I've fallen into this habit of beginning the podcast, now, by letting my guests introduce themselves and I think we're going to continue that today, so if you could...

RL: I'd hate to break a new tradition, it would be bad luck.

DT: It's about two episodes old so don't. [LAUGHTER]

**RL:** I am Rachel long, I am a poet, I am also a facilitator. I occasionally curate poetry events and I am the leader of Octavia which is a poetry collective for women of colour and we are housed at the South Bank Centre.

**DT:** Because you do so much facilitation work and I'm really looking forward to talking to you about Octavia, especially, it's important to remember that we are in fact individuals and we have dreams and hopes of our own, [LAUGHTER] not only those of young people under our tutelage. So, maybe you could explain a bit about your own writing and where you draw your influences from.

**RL:** Thank you. Thank you, also, for recognising that. Sometimes, you don't know whether you feel selfish for feeling like you've got... So much of your work then becomes about the collective or about the groups that you lead or facilitate for and your writing naturally does... Not suffer, 'suffer' is quite a strong word but you just have less time because you're doing other things with the poetry.

It's almost the same energy, as well, as the poetic energy and so once that's spent on writing with or reading with or editing other work, I don't have that same energy left over for myself. My writing at the moment? I'll be honest, I think it's always important to be honest about your writing because it just wouldn't be helpful if someone else is suffering and they're like, "Everyone else seems to be writing loads!" They're probably not.

I'm not writing as much as I would want to at the moment. I think that's mainly due to time and all the other things that I have, which are all blessings and I'm not saying that I wouldn't want them. I just need to find ways that I can do both things.

**DT:** It's important though, I think, as an artist to recognise that you can voice those things and you're not necessarily complaining about the other stuff you're doing.

**RL:** No absolutely.

**DT:** I had a feeling of guilt for a long time and I didn't want to blame the podcast for getting in the way of my writing. Which is plainly the truth, it does get in the way. But for a long time, I didn't feel like I could say it because I felt like moaning about this really amazing thing I got to work on and I was getting funding for. And I was getting to meet lots of brilliant people. I think it's probably doubly worse for you because you work with a lot of really talented young people and it's that thing of, like, you don't want to seem to be complaining about spending so much time with them, do you?

**RL:** Exactly!

**DT:** It's just the reality of trying to make a living as an artist, isn't it?

**RL:** Definitely, yeah. You know, if we all had a 'silver spoon' then would we do all the other [education] work? I'd like to think that I still would because I believe in it. Or would you just, you know, be a hermit and then go off and then send your manuscript out from a cave somewhere because you don't need to do anything else.

I am reading so much and I feel like that is writing in a certain way and it's a way, for me, at the moment that I can still do that on my way to doing other things so that I don't feel like I'm not a poet anymore, that I'm a just a facilitator. Because there's that as well... I feel when I'm not writing as much as I would like to, going into a workshop and trying to inspire young people to write, as well, you feel like a bit of a fraud. I feel like a bit of a fraud.

**DT:** I feel like a fraud all of the time. [LAUGHTER] People say to me, "This is really interesting, all this stuff you're doing", and I'm just walking around guessing at how to do everything.

**RL:** No, you're brilliant at it, you're a good guesser then. Yeah I do, kind of, suffer with that or what I find now is the usual question of what inspires you and the answer in your head is nothing at the moment and you have to try and reel off the answers. Or when you're asked perhaps how much they should be writing in a particular day or week...

**DT:** I always think... This might just be me trying to make myself feel better but if you're not living, you're not experiencing and if you're not experiencing then you can't write. I mean, some people do write from imagination but I think most people write from experience, so if nothing's happening to you. I sometimes feel like nothing's happening to me. [LAUGHTER]

**RL:** That can be a dangerous place though, I think you have to be a certain person... I used to know a particular person, they would almost invent things. They would go to the pub with two friends that had just fallen out, under the guise that he was going to sort it out for them but really, he just wanted something to write about. You could tell, he really did stir certain situations.

**DT:** There's a danger, isn't there, of becoming addicted to drama?

**RL:** Yeah, he definitely was addicted to drama.

**DT:** You've got to write your Edinburgh show somehow. [LAUGHTER]

**RL:** But it can be really fun, I've been in certain situations like, "God, I should really get out of here. I'll just see it through, it might make for some good writing."

**DT:** It's going to make a good poem?

**RL:** Yeah. He seems like someone to get away from, but don't worry you'll get a good poem out of this. Yeah, that's dangerous.

**DT:** Tinder swiping your way to a first collection. [LAUGHTER]

**RL:** Swiping your way to a first collection. Amazing!

**DT:** They look awful. Definitely meeting them. [LAUGHTER] Since we briefly mentioned it, we should probably talk a bit about the facilitation work that you. We'll probably start talking about [Barbican Young Poets](#) first and how you got involved there and working with the now infamous, on the podcast, [Jacob Sam-La Rose](#).

**RL:** He is amazing. He's so incredible, I am so lucky to have met him. So, I met Jacob through [Apples and Snakes](#) in a workshop where we, a small group of young poets, were asked to write about Deptford. Which was really cool, even though I didn't grow up in Deptford, I was dragged to that market many a time on a Saturday.

So, I met Jacob through that and he invited me to be part of his collective Burn After Reading. As my mentor and seeing the way that he is with so many of the young people that he works with, I'm lucky not only to have met him but also to have learnt so much from him in the way that... Hopefully, I can also do some of those things that he does when I am then facilitating for Barbican Young Poets or Octavia, you know. There's a level of love that he has that is completely unashamed, like, the time that he gives up and the patience.

**DT:** It's infectious as well, isn't it?

**RL:** Yeah.

**DT:** So, how did you get involved with Barbican Young Poets?

**RL:** So, after working with Jacob for a while, being part of the collective and maybe being a slightly more proactive one than other people... He'd invited me to facilitate in schools with him because he goes around so many schools in the country, so I did a bit of shadowing with him, as well. So, I think, maybe one day he looked at me and thought, "She could be my assistant tutor on Barbican Young Poets. He invited me to come on board as the assistant tutor.

So, yeah, that's how I started. He then invited me to do this year's, as well, which was also another honour, you know, that I didn't completely mess that up. It's been an absolute joy, I've learned a lot. At first, I think, it's a little bit difficult to straddle. I'm like, should I be in writing right now or should I be, I don't know, moving around the room? So, that is quite hard to navigate to begin with.

**DT:** And your role within BYP, are you teaching on that? Is that how it works? So, I've got a couple of friends that were on last year and my very good friend, [Anna Kahn](#) is on this year and I just love her to bits.

**RL:** Oh! Anna is on fire!

**DT:** But I have the sort of friendship with Anna where we just don't talk about poetry, we just go and eat pizza, which is the best kind of friendship. So, I don't really know how the sessions work. I, sort of, know that there are provocations given to the people involved but maybe you could say a bit more about the structure of the class?

**RL:** Yeah sure. So, that is what has really helped me, as well... How you plan for a longer-term program, you know, this is not just a one-off workshop and then everyone is like, "Yeah, I'm going to write forever" and then you never see them again. So, it's fortnightly sessions over six months, so applications open in summer and then the selection process finishes in October and then it runs until March when there is a final showcase.

So, we meet fortnightly at the Barbican which is a gorgeous place and I think especially for young poets, you know, just to go up in those lifts and feel, "I'm an integral part of an institution such as this". That must do incredible amounts for your confidence as a writer. Jacob leads most sessions and he encourages me to lead... He will always give you space, as well. I've led two of these for this session and that's completely open so it's, kind of like, "Would you like to do this?" and I'm like, "Yeah let's do somethings."

And he won't try and control and be like, "Okay, I need a plan by...", he doesn't. There's a real level of trust there which is really nice. Eighty percent is writing, is generating new poems, each time there's a new provocation and that will range from writing from the poems in the pack... The BYP poetry packs at the beginning of term are legendary... Right through to...

A workshop that I led was from a book of macro-photographs by Lennart Nilsson and writing about a super super super close-up of the heart or what a cancer cell looks like. We also have two guests on the program, so this year we had [Hannah Silva](#) who led a brilliant performance workshop.

**DT:** I can imagine, Hannah is fantastic.

**RL:** She is amazing. So, we were talking about Anna [Kahn], she made Anna read... She, kind of, gave like poetry diagnosis to break, firstly, 'poetry voice'... Which nobody actually in BYP is guilty of. But also, the way that we read a poem and are familiar with that way and feel safe in the way that we read it and never try and challenge ourselves. "That's how I read that poem", even when I was just reading Hotel Art just now I was like, "Remember Hannah. Why don't you read this, you know, like you've received some bad news."

So, she had Anna up there and Anna was reading just one of her incredible poems and then she made her read it... It was about self-belief or, I think, low self-esteem and managing that. Then Hannah was like, "Stop, stop, stop", in a respectful way, "Okay now read it drunk". Anna was like, "Drunk? Okay", and then how it changed the piece.

**DT:** I'm a bit jealous, I'd love to go into a workshop with her and talk about the sound of poems.

**RL:** She's so good, I then had her in for Octavia before our show.

**DT:** We should talk about how this work has influenced your work at Octavia.

**RL:** Totally, that's a prime example. You know, having Jacob inviting Hannah to do that performance workshop, being invited by South Bank for Octavia, to do our Hand Maid's Tale response show. Again, for Women of the World, when was that? Two weekends ago now.

**DT:** March the 12th, wasn't it?

**RL:** Last weekend, wow. No wonder I'm still tired. Okay, I can still be tired. I was like, "Get over it!"

**DT:** Just to give a little bit of context, Octavia is a collective of women of colour, writing. Young? Is there an age limit?

**RL:** There's no age limit.

**DT:** I was going to say young women of colour but perhaps they all just seem young.

**RL:** They are all young because... How it started, nothing to do with any ageism that I have. Just when it started, I wasn't really allowed to advertise it publicly. It was Bea Colley, the literature coordinator at South Bank, just being very generous with the space that she was giving us. So, who I invited were the people that I knew and because of the age I am and the people in my particular poetry circle. They just happen to be young.

**DT:** Was this initiative started by the South Bank Centre? Did they approach you?

**RL:** No, I went to Bea on one of the hottest days of the year and we sat outside. You know, at South Bank in the summer they've got that water feature where you, kind of, run in and it starts and then it goes back down again. So, I remember looking at that because she text me to say she'd be down in a minute and I remember looking at that like, "Could I possibly just walk around the perimeter of that and just get a bit cooler before this meeting starts?" But I didn't, I just sat there and sweated off my makeup.

I went to Bea... I had met Bea a year before that on a young producers' programme to organise National Poetry Day Live, which they have there in association with the Poetry Society. So, I'd met Bea through that and when the idea... Jacob also was instrumental in the shaping of Octavia. I would always and still do, go to Jacob with a particular plan or idea because he is so practical.

He'll give you your idea back in this, kind of, pros [v's] cons list and pose questions to you that perhaps you didn't think about when... You know, there's a certain romanticism and a certain whirlwind of an idea, any idea I think and you don't look at it from all the possible angles. So, I'd had the idea of Octavia before it was ever Octavia but knowing that I wanted a group for women of colour and then I thought, "Oh, should it just be women, you know? Will that not really be accepted?" Actually, I do like some guy poets too, some. [LAUGHTER] I'm joking.

You know, "Maybe it can just be an open space?" But no, I knew in my gut that it had to be what it is. So, I had gone to him and I'd been to him with this idea so many times, you know,

he'd given me questions about it and then I'd gone back to him. He eventually just said to me one day, "Rachel, just do the damn thing, already. Just do it". So, I got in contact with Bea because I love the South Bank Centre, I feel like I artistically grew up there.

I love their program, I love what they put on. I felt like the prestige of a place like that would be good for a group like Octavia, you know.

**DT:** It's very important, I think, for the kind of group you were putting together to be in an established space.

**RL:** I think so, yeah. I hope so and I think I only realised that later. I like that space and I want it to be there and I didn't think about, what is that as a political action saying about a group of women of colour meeting in an established space.

**DT:** Yeah, just in London, I mean, you could have easily have gone to, for example, The Albany Theatre. They would have been really up for that kind of idea. But it's important publicly, I think, in the public perception to not be somewhere where people go, "Of course you're there. That's the kind of thing that they do". If you're suddenly in a space where it's... Not provocative I don't quite mean it like that but I suppose for some people it is provocative isn't it, you know?

**RL:** No, totally, I don't think Octavia would have gotten half the attention that we have had if we were in a lovely cafe in south-east London. I just don't think we would. But that wasn't done... You know, I'd love to think that I did that on purpose. I didn't, I just love that space and I thought that, "Yeah, I want to invite about twenty women of colour" so where can fit that many in a room all at one time.

So, I went to Bea and I was really worried that perhaps she'd be like, "I'm not sure" but straight away she said, "I love the idea". Just straight off the worry went, like, "This is going to actually happen", and she said, "Just send me dates of when you'd like that room. I can sort that out for you", she was incredible. She continues to be incredible, you know, so she was the one who invited us to do the Hand Maid's Tale, first off.

**DT:** So, Hand Maid's Tale.

**RL:** Yes.

**DT:** When did I see that performance? Was that October last year?

**RL:** Yes you saw it in October, at the London Literature Festival.

**DT:** Yes, it was October 2016. It was easily the best spoken word show that I saw last year.

**RL:** Thank you.

**DT:** And, you know, I see a lot of stuff. As you said it was performed again a week ago, are there plans to perform it again?

**RL:** Well, I was reading an email from Bea on the train here and she did say she'd like to talk about it so perhaps. I don't know, my nerves, I don't know how many shows my nerves can take.

**DT:** Yeah. It was odd to see you as 'mother hen' at that show rather than a performer and to see the nerves that you were trying to absorb from the performers so they didn't have to take it on was... I'm not going to say it was nice to watch because [LAUGHTER] it's not nice to watch your friends go through that. I can't recommend that show highly enough so what we'll say at this moment, is the best thing to do is just to follow stuff on social media. If anything comes up then I'll tweet about it and it'll be on our Facebook page and I'll mention it in future podcasts so everyone should keep an eye out for that.

**RL:** It will be on the South Bank Centre website too. Octavia doesn't have Twitter, doesn't have Facebook and that's purposeful, that's political.

**DT:** I wanted to mention that, actually, what was the thinking behind that?

**RL:** Often times I feel that social media platforms aren't particularly good spaces for people of colour or for women, either. You get a lot of just strange people butting their oar in when nobody asks [them to]. So, one of our first shows at South Bank Centre was in the Poetry Library and we were invited to respond to unheard women in the Poetry Library collection. So, Black women poets for Women of the World, last year.

I remember doing an interview afterwards and it was filmed and then it went up, you know, like two or three weeks later and just some of the comments at the bottom of that were ridiculous. It was, "Oh, I don't even know how she can call herself a poet, she can't even speak properly", you know, just because I speak in my very own south London way that I've learned to love after a long time. Actually, I don't know if I love it but accept.

It's like, okay, I can try to speak another way. I could totally put on a voice if I wanted to but I won't be being honest if I speak like that, I find it hard. I still say 'arks-ed' and find it really hard to pronounce certain words because I'm just used to reading them and not saying them out loud.

**DT:** I must admit, as much as you try to always listen to the words and listen to the art I really find your voice comforting. It feels like I'm at home. [LAUGHTER]

**RL:** It was our first performance, it was completely sold out, I'd never seen the Poetry Library that packed. I don't think the South Bank had ever seen it that packed and it really did hit home. It was like, "Oh my gosh", I think this could be a moment in literature where people... And also, people that I didn't expect to be there were there. Not only were they there they were there early, you know, they had brought their bodies to support what we were doing and that was really important.

Then just to have that attempt to undermine that from people who don't know anything, who still think you have to speak in a certain way to be able to write or you have to... And we know in what way they want you to speak. After that I, kind of, put to Octavia... Because I will never make decisions for the whole group, I will always ask them even though it's quite painful to wait a whole week to get an answer back. I think sometimes I should have decided myself but no, that wouldn't be equal.

I'd put it to them and, you know, some people were like, "Yeah. Whatever, I don't really mind". Some had whole essays, like, publishable essays on the benefits of being on social media for women of colour. They're excellent, I just need somewhere to put them. But, you know, the common consensus was that we shouldn't and there's no point, actually. What I didn't realise then, it was just a reaction to that I think, just how freeing it can be when you don't have to be like... And that's another benefit of being at the South Bank because their marketing team is just so vast.

**DT:** Also, one of the benefits of being in a collective is, those that feel like they want to talk on social media can. [**RL:** Yeah, sure!] It's not banned, they can talk freely and they can use it if that's something they're interested in. I've noticed a lot of members of the collective are very vocal on social media about pushing what's going on.

**RL:** Yeah and some not and that's fine.

**DT:** I mean, I wish I could live without social media for the podcast, if I'm honest, because it feels emotionally draining.

**RL:** Does it?

**DT:** I find it a really fake way of communicating.

**RL:** Me too a lot of the time.

**DT:** I know a lot of people don't feel like that. A lot of people absolutely adore being on Instagram, for example, which we're now on. I don't know why.

**RL:** Are you? I don't have it so I wouldn't know.

**DT:** But it's nice, I take pictures of poets and stuff. I have public money so I have to reach out to people.

**RL:** Yeah that's different, I suppose.

**DT:** So, I have an obligation to find avenues to communicate with people.

**RL:** Yeah, it is a tricky one and I think, personally, I'm not that taken with social media and realise that... No, actually, I don't like that we're living in a place where it's almost, like, if you don't your career will suffer for that. I've heard of poets being dropped from certain gigs because they haven't got Twitter and the event is like, "Well we're just going to get

someone who shouts loudly on Twitter because they're going to make more people come to the event".

You know, we're artists we're not marketing managers, so that's hard. But as a collective it's so cool we do not feel the need to then take pictures, to tell people what we're doing and I think actually it's worked in our favour. Which was completely unintentional too, there is not a secretiveness but a curiosity.

**DT:** There is also a lot to be said about the fact that people need to be there to see it, don't they? You know, if you want to experience what the collective does you have to come and sit on a seat and watch it happen.

**RL:** I think that's really powerful, yeah.

**DT:** It's not just a case of 'liking' and retweeting, you know, you've got to get up and get to a show.

**RL:** Yeah, definitely and I think that's been lost.

**DT:** On that note, listeners can follow us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.  
[LAUGHTER]

**RL:** For all of those that love it!

**DT:** Where we'll be doing all of Octavia's marketing work for them. So, I'll be posting updates and there'll be links to places where you can check out Octavia, Barbican Young Poets and Rachel. So, rather than giving out web addresses now, there will be hyperlinks in the episode description and I'll be tweeting stuff. Unfortunately, the clock is ticking, I think we might have to take a final reading.

**RL:** Thank you though, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you.

**DT:** It's been fantastic.

**RL:** Apples

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

**[30:44]**

**DT:** Thank you very much Rachel.

**RL:** Thank you.

**DT:** Thanks for joining us.

**RL:** No, it has been an absolute pleasure.

**Part two (30:51):**

Host: David Turner – DT

Guest: [Raymond Antrobus](#) – RA

**DT:** That was the wonderful Rachel Long. If you can do check out what's going with Octavia collective, they're a fantastic group of writers. Next up is Raymond Antrobus. Ray's another poet that I met at [Verve Poetry Festival](#) in Birmingham and it's a bit ridiculous really that we've only just met because we both live in London. Though, we live on either side of the river so perhaps it's not that surprising.

We spend a lot of time talking about the influence of Derek Walcott on Ray's work as he had sadly passed away not long before the interview took place. This lead us on to talking about Ray taking a, relatively, fresh look at his Jamaican heritage and what it means to do that from London and how these things shaped his new pamphlet *To Sweeten Bitter*, out through [Out Spoken Press](#). Here's Ray.

**RA:** This poem is called *Scratched light*. It's a poem that I think is directly inspired by Derek Walcott. Derek Walcott is a poet from St. Lucia who wrote about Caribbean history and about the people of the Caribbean and empire. There's a line I came across in a Derek Walcott poem which inspired this poem and the line goes, "The heart is circled by sorrows and bitter devotion". Also, I should say that the poem is also inspired by a friend of mine called Phoebe Boswell who is a drawer and artist.

This is a poem which was commissioned by Jaybird Literature Festival, the theme was light and I had to write about a light at a certain time of day. So, the time of day that I wrote this poem was between 2 o'clock to 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Scratched Light – for Phoebe Boswell

Southbank's Security guards wake anyone sleeping  
as if they don't want us to miss  
who we might bump into  
like how I bumped into Phoebe today,  
sat at the tall window,  
drawing a man called Anwaar.

I pull an extra chair and sit next to them  
and talk about maybe moving out of London.

Everything about Phoebe stays on the paper.  
Curving Anwaar's left eye  
she journeys the pencil in a circle –

finding something  
but losing something else  
in every new expression of Anwaar's face,  
which is softer by the time he says *I miss Barbados,*  
*my ex-wife, my children.*

He tears a Tate and Lyle sugar sachet  
as Phoebe's hands press harder into his face.  
We could all be crying or laughing  
as the sun whips through the window  
overlooking old stone banks and insurance offices.

We both hear the etching  
while watching how Phoebe loosens  
the grip on her pencil.  
Anwaar asks who is holding me at night

I tell him half truths – *no one,*  
*I wake alone, I miss my ex,*  
*my grandmother, my father.*

There is nothing in my cup to spill when I tell him  
that grief has moved me back in with mum.  
Anwaar tells me about Swaziland and  
Switzerland and places we could all be  
if the right things stayed together.

Phoebe finishes sketching the shape of the wall  
and the light and shade of his eye,

and now she looks up  
seeing both of us for the first time  
as men  
in the scratched light.

©Raymond Antrobus, 2017

**DT:** Thank you very much Ray. Thanks for joining us. How are you doing?

**RA:** Thank you, I'm good man. Thanks for having me.

**DT:** If you want to just introduce yourself for listeners that don't know you.

**RA:** Sure. My name is Raymond Antrobus, I am a poet, I am a poetry educator. I'm from Hackney in East London, I'm half Jamaican and British, I'm a hearing aid user. Do I define myself as disabled, someone asked me recently I said, "No, I define myself as differently abled". All of those things play into what I write about and how I experience the world.

**DT:** Maybe we could talk a bit about Derek Walcott and the influence he's had on your writing?

**RA:** So, Derek Walcott passed away a few days ago and that hit me hard man. Obviously, I didn't know Derek Walcott personally but he was an icon. He was a figure, he was a symbol of a time and his books [and] his plays [and] his poems were on the shelves of both my parents. Both my mum and my dad, so there was always a presence there even though I didn't start reading Walcott till much later. I mean, probably, *White Egrets* was the first collection of Walcott's that I read from start to finish and that was in 2011 but I'd always known individual poems and stuff like that.

But when I started writing and thinking about, I guess, my Caribbean heritage and trying to explore what that means to write about the Caribbean from England... I did spend some time growing up in Jamaica, I used to go every year and visit family... What I realised is so many of those poems that I wrote thinking about the Caribbean are so clearly inspired by Walcott, so clearly guided by Walcott that his passing, for me, means any Caribbean writer living in the Caribbean or in the Diaspora should be now thinking about what Walcott means to them.

At least that's what I'm doing and I've called up a few other friends who are also from different Caribbean islands, you know, just to ask them like, "Here's a moment, here's a moment. Let's talk about that". I'm still, kind of, processing that so I don't really have any answers but it's a point where I'm really excited to explore in my poetry and my life and otherwise.

**DT:** I suppose, for me and any listeners that aren't aware of Derek's work is there one thing that you would point to as something that is a must read as beginning [point]? Or is that a too simplistic question?

**RA:** I think the famous Walcott poem that's doing the rounds is his, *Love After Love* poem which I think is on the GCSE syllabus, as well, which is a poem about his marriage breaking down and him, kind of, returning to himself. So, a lot of people love that poem and start there but like you, actually, to be honest it wasn't until fairly recently that I started reading Walcott periodically. Like, looking at full collections and seeing that when he was twenty he was writing 'this', when he was thirty he was writing 'this'.

In fact, a good place to start with Walcott is there's a *Paris Review* [interview](#) with him in 1995 when he'd just won the Nobel Prize for Literature and he's fifty-five years old. The interview is just him talking about everything, you know, beyond his life and beyond his poetry and beyond his painting and beyond his thinking and his family. He's talking like a sage, he's talking in a way that, I don't know... I hadn't actually read that interview until Hannah Lowe put it on Facebook and I've actually now written bits of it in my diary and I'm going to put it on my wall as, kind of, little mottos. So, yeah I think that's a good place to start actually.

**DT:** So, you have a pamphlet coming out soon.

**RA:** Yeah.

**DT:** When people are listening to this interview it will be out. It will be out on the 10th of April through Out Spoken Press and that's called?

**RA:** The pamphlet is called, *To Sweeten Bitter*, it's pretty much a collection of poems which I primarily wrote about three or four years ago when my dad passed away and I returned to Jamaica to tell the family that this has happened, these were his last words. But what came out of that was realising that there is an even stronger historical and emotional link to Jamaica and England than I'd realised.

The moment when I realised that was going back to my aunt's house in Montego Bay, walking around in this market and there's a museum called the Sam Sharpe Museum and outside the Sam Sharpe Museum is a noose and a, kind of, little square pit and a memorial, a placard that says, "This is the spot where Samuel Sharpe was hung by the British in (I believe it was) the late 17th century". So, you go in to this museum and the first thing you see is a huge map, first of Liverpool then of Bristol then of London and the docks there.

It was such a moment for that to hit me, I was like, "Wow, you know if I'd been"... How did I not know about this in this way? In some ways, I think my dad had told me and I think I had known about these things but I think probably with the passing of my dad there was a new meaning, a new connection that I had to make sense of. I think losing my dad I felt like I'd also lost access to a part of my culture. Living in England as well and only occasionally being in Jamaica.

So, I wanted to know what that meant then following the kind of things that had been happening as of late in England with Brexit and with xenophobia and the, quote, new normal... The normalisation of all of these things. Realising how hardly anyone understands that history, that kind of colonial history which is this huge abstract thing to so many people but actually it's living, its live. It's here in our faces every day.

It's why in the poem *Scatched Light* I had to say, you know, when you are looking over the Thames and seeing these buildings, do you know how many of those buildings were insurance companies for slave ships? You know, and they're still standing. So, yeah that's one, I guess, angle of the book.

**DT:** And when you were in Jamaica was there an obvious difference in people's relationship to these ideas? Is that what you were seeing?

**RA:** Yeah, in terms of England... In terms of the people that I come across and conversations I have with people in Jamaica about empire and colonialism, I think it's really dormant to them, to the people just living every day. You know, there were taxi drivers who would say things like, "Hey, you're from England. Jamaica was better under British rule, comeback. We want the queen back" and my reaction to that was always one of assuming that person is ignorant.

But it's like, "Well. Do you really? How much do you know really about that colonial period?" Then that creates this whole confusion in my mind because then I'm like, well who am I to check this guy who is living on the island, who survived and is living? So, yeah, I try not to, I guess, arrive in Jamaica and only look through it through a Western lens because that's also a kind of colonial [view]. So, this is it, it's a complicated multi-layered history to look at.

For me, there has been no better way to write about it than poetry because I feel like when poetry is done well it allows for contradiction, it allows for questioning. It doesn't start on the premise of, "I have an answer". It's the premise of, "I felt something, I've experienced something. This is what unfolded".

**DT:** Yeah. It might be time for a second reading.

**RA:** Yeah, wicked. I'm going to read this poem because it's something that I'm still working on, I don't think I've finished it yet. So, this is a draft. This poem I wrote in New York. I was in New York and came across a news article which was talking about a man called Daniel Harris who was profoundly deaf. He's driving and he, apparently, was speeding and the police siren goes off to make him stop. He's a deaf driver and doesn't hear the police siren. He's pursued and as he eventually stops he gets out of the car and the police officer, because of the way he was moving his hand, shoots him dead. I mean, I just had to write about that.

Just to say before, as well, I speak British Sign Language and Sign Assisted English which is a little bit different to British Sign Language. I'm also trying to pick up a little bit of American Sign Language, as well, all three of those languages are different. This poem ends on a word in American Sign Language. So, this poem is called:

### Two Guns In The Sky For Daniel Harris

If you are a deaf driver, you might not hear a siren, you might not see a police car behind you. When Daniel Harris stepped out of his car, the policeman was waiting. Gun raised. I use the past tense though this is irrelevant in Daniel's language, which is sign. Sign has no future or past, it is a present language. You are never more present when a gun is pointed at you.

What language says this if not sign? But the police officer saw *hands waving in the air*, fired and Daniel dropped his hands, his chest bleeding out onto the concrete meters from his home

and I am in Breukelen Coffee House in New York reading this news on my phone when a black police woman walks in, guns on her hips, my friend next to me reading the comments section: *Black Lives Matter*. Right now there is nothing we'd say out loud, there is nothing we'd sign, even though the last word I learned in American sign language was *alive* - *alive* - both thumbs pointing at your lower abdominal, index fingers pointing up like two guns in the sky. ©Raymond Antrobus, 2017

**DT:** Thank you Ray.

**RA:** I mean, one thing I would say about that poem, it's interesting being someone who performs poetry and someone who writes poetry. Then when I'm beginning to think about how do I incorporate a physical present language like sign language into poetry because one of the questions for me in this poem, "Does this work if you can't see me?" This is a poem at needs witnesses. That idea in and of itself I think is such a powerful and important premise in the way that, like I said, I'm interested in engaging with people in a live setting.

I'm interested in hearing people responding, as well, as opposed to... And I still love doing this of course... Like, writing page poetry and thinking about what shape it takes on that page, you know, and everything that comes with that but in a way that's a different body. So, that's something I'm thinking about now with poems like this because everything I write is me trying to connect.

**DT:** Yeah. Well, it's a similar set of thought processes that I go through... I actually don't feel like my podcast is a very good way of engaging with people, either, because you miss out on the physical engagement I have with guests [**RA:** right] and the conversation. I really want the audience to be present with that which of course they can't be.

**RA:** But then isn't it about... So, you know, I was just talking yesterday with a friend of mine who makes radio and loves radio and was talking about how, "Man, when I was younger I didn't watch no TV. It was all about radio". What I loved about radio is that nothing stimulated my imagination more because I can hear the voices and then I'm picturing them.

**DT:** Oh yeah, I've actively rejected filming stuff. I've decided not to do that because there's a level of comfort and relaxation that you can offer a guest immediately without sticking a camera in their face. [**RA:** Yeah.] I've had guests on in their pyjamas and stuff, you know, friends of mine and we just hang out and it's really chilled. You wouldn't know that they're sitting there in their sweatpants. But yeah, absolutely, I've always been a much bigger fan of the radio than television.

I think television is too obvious, it's literally too in your face, there's too much going on. It feels like there's a lack of live interaction with people rather than a visual aspect, I think. Like you were saying, because the ending of that poem you just read is very visual, although you describe it really well, there is that immediate feeling of missing out on something because it's purely audio. Actually, when I saw you read it at Verve I was right at the back and I couldn't see your hands, so that adds an aspect to it as well.

**RA:** Aha, that's good.

**DT:** It seems to be coming up a lot in the podcast. It's an interesting thought process go through about engaging with audiences, regardless of talking about issues around accessibility. The way you use the stage and the way you use your words and recognising

there's a difference between an audio recording with visuals or without visuals. There's obviously a difference between somebody seeing it on the page or, in fact, someone else reading your poetry out somebody else.

**RA:** Yeah, absolutely. A few years ago, I was asked to read a poem on Radio 4 and that was such a interesting experience for me as someone who has... I did speech therapy for ten years because I couldn't speak properly. Quote, properly. I would slur my words so I had to do all of these mouth exercises around articulation. Now what was interesting about being on BBC Radio was that the producer that I was working with, I won't say his name, he came up to me after the recording and said, "You slur your words".

And that was such a thing to say to me as someone who's done all of this speech therapy and thinking that I'd, kind of, got rid of that and moved past that and he said he could hear it almost instantly. So, he said I needed to go back to speech therapy. My poem wasn't used on the radio and I went back to speech therapy. But that moment was such a... It was cutting, it was so cutting and that's one thing that made me think...

You know, because as you said about having a love of radio, I love radio too. I've always got the radio on even in this room here, it is something I dreamed of being a part of and being asked to be on Radio 4 was a landmark. Then not getting on because of, like I said before, being differently abled was something which... Yeah, I don't know, I'm just saying it brought up a lot of questions about where I belong, who am I speaking to and how am I connecting with people. Am I connecting with people?

**DT:** That also brings up a lot of questions which we were trying to, sort of, bring up and answer when I started the podcast, this narrow-minded view of what is accepted as broadcastable, you know.

**RA:** Yeah.

**DT:** Somehow because you don't fit a particular model, for whatever reason, and this is a purely audio one we're talking about now. Somehow, you're not then able to be packaged for a program because that feeds into this idea that then producers believe that you'd be happy to have that advice.

**RA:** Yeah exactly.

**DT:** Because all that you could possibly want to do is fit that model and be packaged in that certain way and then we end up in this circle. A pretty vicious one of people being folded into boxes, you know.

**RA:** I think that one of the reasons that I gravitated towards spoken word was for its freedom, it gave me a platform to be able to be heard and seen on my own terms. One of the frustrations of spoken word is also part of what I just said, the freedom. Because I think sometimes there's too much freedom, I think that there isn't enough legacy building in terms of spoken word. What do I mean by that? I mean there's a lot of younger poets who don't seem to realise, kind of, what's come before them.

Derek Walcott said something that really resonated with me, "Originality cannot exist without an origin", you need to know the origin before you can be original. A lot of conversations I've been having with younger poets recently... You know, I often say who are the poets you admire, who do you look up to? And they will only mention contemporary poets, poets who have come out in the last three, four, five years or poets who are already hyper visible.

But there's a wealth and a range of poets that use music, for example, that aren't being looked at. Poets like Ursula Rucker, Space Ape, Mike Skinner from The Streets, I classify that as poetry personally even if he doesn't himself I would make an argument for it. I think it's important and it's something I really admire and appreciate about speaking with you and being on a podcast is that this is a document.

**DT:** Well, it's the most fundamental idea behind the podcast is to document what's going on. People who are regular [listeners]... I'm very aware that some people listen a lot to this and they're bored of hearing me say the same thing. [LAUGHTER] But since you brought it up. This [podcast] was born out of going to spoken word events... My background is within fine art, performing arts where it's all about context, it's all about studying some form of art history as part of the degree.

I didn't go to university but I was around and working with people that had been through that model and context was everything, especially performance art. Some of it is completely inaccessible if you don't know your history because it's so heavily reliant on you knowing... So, it's a bit exclusionary in that sense but I like the idea that you are aware of those that came before you and I didn't feel like it existed anywhere nearly enough within spoken word. In poetry, it does but so often, like you just said, it's the hyper visible ones that get more and more credit. Yeah. I just felt like something needed to be done to at least just start laying people's voices down.

**RA:** Yeah.

**DT:** You know, this is not a vehicle for me to get my name known. This really is just about giving people a chance to talk about their work. Going back to what you were just saying, you don't get on the BBC. We'll just end up now for two minutes nodding and agreeing but there are so many fantastically talented people, absolutely brilliant writers and they will never get the coverage that they deserve because they don't fit the right boxes, for whatever reason.

**RA:** Yes.

**DT:** Just for the listeners, there's a really cute cat staring at me through the window. It really put me off then. [LAUGHTER]

**RA:** Oh yeah, that's Frankie. Frankie is a cat who gives me company, particularly, when the writing isn't going so well and Frankie comes about and sits in my lap and I just have to stroke her.

**DT:** Yeah, I suddenly got really self-conscious. Frankie was looking at me like, "Don't spin out that old rubbish again".

**RA:** Frankie does have a judgmental face, just look at those eyes.

**DT:** We're running out of time so we're going to finish on a reading but just before we do I want to mention that you're a co-founder Chill Pill, along with Mr Gee and you've got a few things coming up but it's too late to mention them now because this podcast would have gone out. Where can people check that out?

**RA:** People can... If you're on Twitter follow @ChillPillUK we're always putting up our next shows.

**DT:** Thanks very much for today Ray.

**RA:** Oh, just to say Chill Pill is Mr. Gee, myself, Adam Kammerling, Simon Mole and Deanna Rodgers. There's five of us.

**DT:** Of course it's the lot of you! I get confused because everyone's doing so many other things. I'll be speaking to Deanna soon about Come Rhyme With Me and Dean Atta so we're meeting up at some point in the future. So, a lot of these names that you're hearing will be turning up, I hope soon, or at least by the summer. Thank you, Ray, we'll finish with a reading please.

**RA:** Thank you. This poem, because I spoke about doing speech therapy, I wanted to write a poem or look at a form for a poem where I had to use every sound in the alphabet. So, I found this form called Abecedarian, which is where the beginning of every line of the poem begins alphabetically. So, A-B-C, right through to Z. Also, this poem is a work in progress, the working title for it is:

#### Articulation Training

Accurately describing Speech Therapy would  
be difficult. Example – when the therapist  
cited the word “emotion”, I could  
define it in the way it was stabbed again and again with a pencil, because I  
said

*E – Mo – Tee – On*, the *shhh*- never existed.

Failure furniture'ed my mouth where there was so much  
gravity in grammar I couldn't

hold a hearing conversation – dropping me  
inside a script of

jumbled inner-judgement, a jargon which  
knackered my brain with words - too faint to

learn. One art hard to

master is the mud of

noise in a echoy room. The *iss* in  
“optimistic” never existed. I said *option stick*, my deaf way of clinging to  
positives but I never  
quit quizzing what is quietly actual while  
reading fog-patches of lips. When I learned  
sign, I spoke to deaf students who wished for greater deafness because  
tongues couldn’t meet them on their own terms. This  
undid the universe we never understood until all the  
vowels were voiced on our fingers, all  
words lost in whispers were woven by hand and held in facial expressions, as  
“X’s” that marked mistakes exited my anxious existence.  
Yes, I speak now to my younger self who lost  
Zzz’s – who does not yet know he has all the sound he needs to exist.  
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**DT:** Thank you very much Ray. Thanks for joining us.

**RA:** Thank you.

**DT:** And thank you to Frankie the cat.

**RA:** Thanks Frankie for giving me some company.

**End of transcript.**