



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Anthony Joseph.

Patricia Cumper The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper.

Pauline Walker And I'm Pauline Walker. We created the Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page, and screen about their lives, work, and artistic practice.

PC We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

PW Anthony Joseph is an award-winning, Trinidad-born poet, novelist, academic, and musician. He's the author of four poetry collections and three novels. His 2018 novel *Kitch: A Fictional Biography of a Calypso Icon* was shortlisted for the Republic of Consciousness Prize, the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Award, and longlisted for the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature. His most recent publication is the experimental novel *The Frequency of Magic*. In 2019, he was awarded a Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship. His new collection *Sonnets for Albert* will be published by Bloomsbury in 2022. As a musician, he's released eight critically acclaimed albums, and in 2020, received a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Composer's Award. He holds a PhD in creative writing from Goldsmiths University and is a senior lecturer in creative writing at De Montfort University Leicester. Anthony Joseph, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Anthony Joseph Hi. Hi, thank you for having me.

PW You're welcome. I'm going to start with the first question, which is tell us about Anthony Joseph growing up. When did words and stories and music become part of your life?

AJ Well - Well, I grew up in Trinidad. I was born and raised there. Grew up with my grandparents, my grandmother and my grandfather. We grew up - Well, I grew up in, I guess, kind of a middle class neighbourhood about eight miles outside of Port of Spain, eight miles east of Port of Spain. So, yeah, that was kind of the - the - the thing. I mean I was - I was a child. I was on my own, you know. They were two older folks and I was on my own. And we had land in the back of the house so I was -

I had quite a idyllic childhood, running about in the yard and, you know, going to school just up the road. And that - that was - you know, it was pretty cool. It was interesting because, you know, there was a lot of - there was a lot of tension between, at that time, my grandmother and my mum, and, you know, all sort - sort of difficult things going on with my grandfather as well. So it was - it wasn't - it wasn't completely peaceful, but it was - it was interesting and it was - it was fun for the most part. In terms of music, I mean I think my first sort of exposure and - and interest in music was, you know, at a really young age. I - I discovered my grandfather's record collection and he had a lot of like Mighty Sparrow records and some old calypso, some old jazz and stuff. And when we wasn't around, I would play them on the radiogram, you know. Got really involved in listening to music in that way. And then, you know, started going to school and stuff. Started going to secondary school and, you know, just getting really deeply into music and listening to the radio, and, you know, carnival and all the calypso music and all the steel pan. It was just around, you know. It's a small, small island and very intense experience of growing up with music and carnival culture. So, yeah, I grew up listening to a lot of calypso steel pan. And on the radio, there was a lot of, you know, American music, pop music. And what really intrigued me was the lyrics. You know, I was really into the lyrics how, for instance, The Mighty Sparrow or Lord Kitchener could - you know, could say one thing and mean so many other things or suggest things, or how they would find a way to use creole and make it - make it very humorous. I was really intrigued with the lyrics. And then probably when I was about 11 or 12, started going to secondary school and I started trying to - to write my own lyrics to songs, you know, to pop songs using the same melodies and writing my own lyrics to them. And, yeah, that how I actually started writing poetry, you know. That became a practice. I became kind of obsessed with it and I would buy copybooks and fill them with just lyrics and lyrics. And then before you knew it, I was like, "Wow, I'm a poet," you know? Yeah. So that was it.

PC That's interesting because you see you - when we look at all the things that you've done, you - you're a musician, you're - you're a poet, you're a novelist. You've moved through so many genres. What - what inspires you to move from one genre to the next?

AJ I think, you know, coming to poetry the way that I did, you know. Coming to poetry via music. For me, poetry has always had a really strong connection to music. I - I don't see them as separate forms. I see them as variations of the thing - of the same thing. So I guess, yeah, coming to poetry via music made me feel very comfortable moving between the two, you know. And, you know, the interesting thing with music is that it - it's immediate. So I love the - the immediacy of music, the fact that, you know, you - you - you can experience it in a very immediate way. And poetry and writing is another process that takes a little bit more time and a little bit more concentration and focus. So that sort of yin and yang thing of immediacy and sort of - a more sort of intellectual or - or a more detailed process of absorbing the material. I find that attractive, you know. And I'm able - You know, I'm lucky enough to be able to move between the two. I think also for me, because I was quite a - a, I guess, introverted child... That was quite insular. When I started getting involved with music and - and playing music, I saw it as a way of expressing a particular side of my personality, which was expressive and - and, you know, liked to be on stage and like to perform. And, yeah, I got involved with that, I guess, for that reason, because it gave me an outlet to do that. And then I

realised as well that, you know, doing music - and I still experience it now, doing - playing with my band - that when you do a musical performance, you are mostly yourself because you can't press rewind or erase. You're in the moment. You have to be who you are, otherwise your audience is going to see right through you. It's not going to work. So you need to be present. And I find that I really - And I know. Quite a zen experience to be in the moment on stage. It's quite a special space, you know. I mean there's a lot of connections to - as well, I guess, to growing up in the Baptist church and seeing, you know, Baptist ministers preaching and seeing how they handle the immediacy of the moment and dealing with the energy in the room. That was very attractive to me and still is. And that's what I kind of channel into what I do.

PC You see that brings me to my next question because just - just listening to - to both the music and the poetry, it seems to me that rhythm is absolutely fundamental to - to the way that you write. So what you're saying about music and - and - and words and everything. So it seems to - to me to boil down to rhythm. I listen to, you know, Kamau Brathwaite. And so many Caribbean poets are based in rhythm. What does rhythm mean to you as a writer?

AJ You know, I think because I'm a Caribbean person, because I'm a Trinidadian and I grew up with a particular - speaking in a particular way. The Trinidadian accent is really special. A lot of people say that it's - it's musical, you know. It's very musical, the way we speak, the way we phrase things, the way we break, you know, the English language and distort it and creolize, it's quite special. I think all - I mean all the Caribbean has that. But Trinidad has a very singsong kind of melodic kind of thing to their - the accent in a way that, I don't know, Barbados might not have to that extent or Jamaica doesn't have to that extent. Although I might get a lot of Jamaicans, you know, cussing me about that. But no -

PC No, no, no, I'm - I'm Jamaican. I'm not cussing. I completely agree.

AJ Okay, okay. Cool. But we definitely have a - a - a little bit of twang that is quite melodic. And I grew up speaking that and hearing that, and that kind of became part of the way that, you know, I expressed my poems. And also I guess music, you know, the influence of music, the influence of - of hip-hop, or the influence of reggae music as well, the influence of - of jazz later on, you know, got me really in tune with rhythm. I think, you know, poetry is rhythm. Poetry is - is, you know, is all about finding the best words that sound, you know, the most effective in a particular space, in a particular rhythm, you know. So, yeah, I think it's - yeah, it is. I mean speech is rhythm, you know. It's all around us.

PC And I do think you have a particular gift of it. I mean I'll take all the other praise, but I do think you have a particular gift to you.

AJ Yeah, okay, cool.

PW So we're going to hear a poem from your upcoming - upcoming collection in a moment. But first I wanted to go back to your early collections and - and find out what the inspirations were for them and what were the major themes?

AJ Okay. Which ones are we talking about especially here?

PW Well, *Rubber Orchestras* I read, which I loved, actually.

AJ Wow.

PW Could you tell us about that one?

AJ Yeah, *Rubber Orchestras*...

PW I mean the title is intriguing for a start.

AJ Yeah, the title comes from a - a poem by Ted Jones, who's a Black American poet, who was a - also a surrealist poet. At that time, I was really into, I guess, language poetry and experimental - just experimental - just experimental writing. I was at point where I was like - I was searching for - for new - new ways into language, you know. New ways in and new ways out of language. And I was interested in - in stretching language to - to breaking point, to the point where the reader is not only confused, but kind of hypnotized by what's going on and not able to fully understand what's going on, but also to - to sense the poem on a deeper level than just the literary, you know. I was interested in that - in that idea. And that comes out of a study of - of sort of language. Poets like Bruce Andrews, people that would experiment with the word as an object rather than - you know, as a thing, rather than just for what it meant. You know, were going beyond - I was going beyond just what the word meant, but also what the word looked like or felt like or - you know. So I was interested in that. And there, was you know, a surrealist poet. I still think I'm quite influenced by surrealism. And I came up with a way of generating texts which was based on, I guess, sampling, you know. And I started doing this process and I wrote like a hundred poems using that process, and

that was - that is what came out. That is - *Rubber Orchestras* is what emerged. So it was an experiment. It was definitely an experiment. And a lot of times, I wasn't - I didn't what the poems were going to do or how they were going to work on the page. I just - I was following a formula and a process to make it happen. And, yeah - And I did that - I did that for about a year and collected the poems. There's very little editing done to the poems. They kind of came out the way they are, you know. I think it's the collect - Is - my - The collection of mine that is the most - most difficult. I think a lot of people have said, "Well, you know, I - I haven't been able to find a way into it. There's a lot of stuff that sounds great, but I don't understand what's going on." And I - I kind of like that. And that's the - the concept of - of the orchestra that is - you know, that is rubber, that is not just sound, but texture, you know. So yeah. I hope that explains it.

PW Yes, and you - you certainly succeeded with me when I was reading it because I didn't quite know where I was. But I - I think that's - that's - that's part of the point of them, really.

AJ Yeah, yeah. Yeah. The sorry ending. It's the sorry ending. Mm.

PW Yeah. Can you - Can you tell us about your new collection that's coming out next year? You know, have you - have you carried those ideas through into - into this? Is it - Did you create them in the same way?

AJ Not at all, no. This is a more... This is a... I don't know. I guess the poems are all sonnets to my father who passed away about three years ago now, so they're - they're sonnets for Albert. And they are, I guess, a lot more direct and a lot more intimate and a lot more personal. So it's not really - I mean, yeah, there's some experimentation in how you - you know, in all poetry, at some level, is experimentation. But there - there - there isn't that sort of focus on disorienting the reader as much as before. It's - They're very direct sort of homages to my father in a way and homages and investigations of, you know, masculinity and fatherhood. And I really wanted - I wanted people to sort of, you know, like the - the best sonnets, enable you to have a moment of contemplation and then, you know, you move away. It - It gives you a couple of moments where you read the poem. You have an experience and then you move on. So I was attracted to the sonnet form for that reason. And, yeah, the poems are pretty direct. Some of them are filled with - with grief. Some of them are filled with humour. And what I've done, I guess, I've - I've tried to also capture the spirit of my father and his humour and his - his attitude, his - his vibe, his vibration, you know. He was a very charismatic figure in my life. He was absent for most of my childhood. Pretty much all of my childhood he was absent, so he was - he - he - As I say in one of the poems, you know, he loomed in my imagination, you know, and became this huge figure. And, yeah, charismatic guy, life of the party, could be - could've been an actor.

PW Can you share one of the sonnets with us?

AJ Yeah, if you give me a sec. Okay, I mean it's - it's quite, I guess - I guess, graphic, but it's not - it's not - you know, it's not obscene. It's just real stuff. There's a series of poems in this - in the collection called 'Shame', so this is the first version of 'Shame. There was something about shame in my father because he was - You know, as I said, he was very charismatic and very proud. And he hid his suffering. Whatever suffering that he experienced in his life, he wouldn't speak about it. He kept it hid. He kept all that - He kept things to himself. He didn't want people to know. And the last time I saw him, he was almost - you know, he was - he was dying, but he was almost ashamed of it, you know. It was a very interesting process. And I think it's - it's a Caribbean thing maybe, of that generation. He was ashamed of the decay of the body and he was ashamed that he was pulling away from us. So this is 'Shame'.

[Reading of 'Shame']

PC Wow. Okay. That's very, very moving. (overlapping conversation) And I'm going to change it all now with the next question.

AJ Yes, please. Please do.

PC As you can tell from my voice, I grew up in the Caribbean, too.

AJ Okay.

PC My father would regularly travel to Trinidad and he'd always come back with the latest thing by Lord Kitchener, Mighty Sparrow, Chalkdust. And I suppose from a Jamaican point of view, it was the erudition, the interesting world affair, the skill as a storyteller of the calypsonians have fascinated us. So I just kind of wanted to know why did you decide to write your fictional biography of - of Kitch?

AJ Well, you know, the - the impetus for that was when Kitchener died, I was in London. He died in 2000. I was in London and I heard that Kitchener died. And I felt that - I felt like a part of me died as a Trinidadian because, you know - you know, as - as I think - Brother Superior - he was another calypsonian - said this really interesting thing that everybody in Trinidad alive today grew up listening to Lord Kitchener, and he said that in the '90s and it was absolutely true, you know.

Kitchener was a ubiquitous presence. He was part of what it meant to be a Trinidadian. And then he died and there was this gap and it was - it was quite moving that he wasn't - he was just not - he was no longer there. There was a space. And I started thinking, you know, this man, you know, lived to his 80s, or whatever, and made calypso music since the 1920s, '30s, or whatever. And there is not book. You know, I can't go to a bookshop and borrow a book. I can't find out about his life, you know. I knew he'd lived in London for many years. And I was like - There's no document - very little documentation of it, and I was like, "Somebody has to do this. Somebody has to write this man's life. He contributed so much." And I decided I was going to do it, you know, because no one else was doing it, so it was - it was a response to that - to that absence, you know. Geraldine Connor was another Trinidadian. She was an activist, an actor, and a dancer as well who came here around the time of Kitchener, probably a little bit earlier, in the sort of mid-40s. She said - She famous says that, you know, there is no history of us. There is no record of us as Caribbean people in the UK. There's a hole and we fall into it, you know. And Kitchener felt like he'd fallen into this hole. So it was a response to that. My response was like I've - I've got to write this because if I don't do it, everything is going to be lost. No one's going to know about this man. There's no book, you know. And that was the impetus, and that was in 2000. And I started writing and collecting and doing interviews. And then by the time I came around to doing my PhD many years later, I'd still - I was still working and researching on this, and, yeah, I decided to turn it into the focus of my PhD. And then it really took off, and, you know, it was - yeah, it was an interesting experience interviewing people who knew Kitchener and musicians who worked with him, and going to Trinidad, and going where he lived, and - yeah. So yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean there's something to be said about the form as well, you know, if we have the time to discuss that - that it's...

PC Well, that was my next question.

AJ Yeah. Well, you know -

PC Because I noticed that you use the present tense a lot, and there is energy, there is practically a bounce in the language. And that seemed to express, you know, certainly in - in his early days, who he was, this kind of formidable energy, creative energy that had - you know, is trying to forge a life for himself.

AJ Yes, absolutely.

PC So, yeah, I'm - I was really interested in - in the way you used the form, all the voices you brought into the form, the way, as his life changed, the form also changed. So my really simplistic question is what - what did you want the reader to take away from - from Kitch?

AJ Well, you know, I mean the more I studied biography and memoir and the act of - of writing about people's lives, I realised very - very early on that the form, the biography genre has been obsessed with the lives of great men. And these great men are invariably middle class or upper class White men. And the standard form of the - of a - of these biographies has always been a camera almost following this great man's life, you know, the triumph, the ups and down, you know, the singular - the singular presence that moves through the world. The focus is on that. And, you know, sort of looking at feminist critique, actually, kind of turned me away from them because, you know, that's just one story, you know? And that's just - It's very limiting. And especially in the Caribbean, I think, our lives have not been so much about individuality, it's been about community. I mean, definitely, Kitchener in Kitchener's time, the - the people that created Kitchener was not just Kitchener, it was his community. It was the people that supported him, his - the people that were his friends, his colleagues, other musicians. And I thought, you know, I need to find a way of - of manifesting that in the text. I need to find a way of manifesting that collectivity, that community in the text. And then when I started doing research, you know, because the people that knew Kitchener were a lot of Trinidadians - there were a lot of English folk as well - but they all had individual stories and individual voices, and I decided to - to capture - to try to capture their voices as people, rather than just take the information that they were giving me and translate it into my own words. I kind of let them speak in the text. And that was - that was it, essentially.

PC In an odd way, it reminds me of those wonderful quilts that those Gullah women make in - in America.

AJ Oh, yeah.

PC Where the fabric is what the fabric is, but the pattern is created by the maker.

AJ Oh, wow, okay.

PC It had that sort of - That had that sort of feel for me.

AJ Yeah.

PC You grew up in the Caribbean. You **write** about the transition, you know, from living in the Caribbean to living in England. How have you found adapting to life here? I've been to Trinidad

once or twice. It is the most amazing place where all sorts of cultures and languages mingle and meet. How does it feel moving from that sort of society into - into - into British society?

AJ Yeah, you know, it's a funny thing. Because Trinidad was a colony, was colonial for so long, a lot of the things were familiar to me, you know. I remember reading Stuart Hall talking about this as well, that, you know, he was driving through the country - he was coming into the country and - and seeing things and realizing that he - they were part of his imagination already. You know, it was a similar thing for me. A lot of the stuff - a lot of the things were familiar, like a lot of cultural things, like the music, the fashion. I wasn't prepared for the weather or - or the food. No one told me about that. But, no, definitely it was like part - I was - I kind of knew a lot of it already. I kind of knew a lot of the mannerisms and the - the sort of the attitudes. So, yeah, that was familiar. And - But was difficult, I think, for me was that I came here when I was - I came here in my 20s. I came here in my early 20s, so I'd lived this whole, full life in Trinidad and I'd never been anywhere. I didn't have any experience of travelling or whatever, and the first place I ever came to was here. First plane I ever got onto was to come here. So on a personal sort of emotional level, that was really difficult, and I found that within a year of being here, I had to rush back. I just couldn't take it. I had to rush back and reconnect with my folks, reconnect with grandmother, grandfather, my brother, and then come back, you know. So, yeah, that was very difficult, just missing home and being torn away in that way was - was difficult. But making that transition was good. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it. I was at an age where - I was at the age that - Like Kitchener was at the same sort of age, and a lot of people that came under Windrush were that sort of age, you know, the beginning of their manhood, the beginning of maturity. It's an exciting time, you know. And I got here in the 80 - late '80s, and it was the time of, you know, Soul II Soul and - and, you know, partying, and, yeah, it was great, you know. So...

PC So - So sorry.

AJ That was fun. Yeah, that's it.

PC I was going to ask you how does that - that affect you as a storyteller, though, that you have this rich but different past, and then you're sitting in this particular present? Do you think that has any - Does it resonate in the - in the stories that you tell and how you tell them?

AJ Yeah, you know, I think - I think being here, in a strange way, has made more Trinidadian, you know. Being here this long has made me more Trinidadian and more focused on - on the process of being a - you know, a Caribbean man and - and - and, you know... Yeah. I mean keep quoting people and stuff, but Kamau - We were talking about Kamau earlier, and the first time I met him he was - he was in London and I - I said to him, "Yo, man, you know, I find that, you know, I've been here a few

years now and I - I keep writing about what it means to be in Trinidad. I keep writing about - about that." And he was like, "Well, you know, you only really become a Caribbean person when you leave the Caribbean," you know. So for me it's - being here has - has made me reconsider - And, I guess, hold on to things a lot stronger than if I was in Trinidad. So I find that I write a lot about Trinidad, still - still doing that. I'm a Caribbean writer, you know, I think, so I keep writing and referencing and sort of going back to that. But mixing it with an experience of Europe, you know, mixing it with a sort of literary heritage of Europe and America as well, you know. So it's a - it's a mix. There's a real fusion that's going on.

PC I think Caribbean people are a genius at that, but I have to say, we're reading about - What is it you say? Black back crapaud and Jamette. I'm thinking, okay, this is a whole language and world which is very rich and lovely to listen to.

AJ Oh, yeah. Yeah. Absolutely, yeah. I mean, you know, that's the thing. The musicality of the Trinidadian language, as I was saying, and the way that - We have a way of making everything - of equalising everybody and everything with language, you know. No matter how big you think you are, a Trinidadian could bring you right down to size with their language, you know. (overlapping conversation) I try - I try to do that in a way. Yeah, that's right.

PC Yes, yes, yes. The banter is serious, you know. It's serious.

AJ Yes.

PC If you can't stand up, don't enter the ring.

AJ Yeah, that's right. Mm. Yeah.

PW So you teach creative writing. How does your own education and background influence the way you teach creative writing? And how have you found a way to not just survive, but thrive within the British academic system?

AJ That's - Those are good questions. I think - I mean when I got involved in academia, I - I got involved in it pretty late, actually. I got involved in it after I was already a published poet. When I say "involved with it", sort of my first sort of ventures into teaching and really being an academic

came, you know, a few years after I'd published my first two collections. But coming into it - I mean, actually, my first teaching job was teaching science fiction writing, so I didn't really have any opportunity there to introduce students to a lot of Caribbean work. But, definitely, after that, my - and up to now, my sort of mission has always been to expose students to a range of literature, which includes the Caribbean, which includes Black British. So in a lot of ways I'm expanding the canon. I'm trying constantly to expand the canon. I'm - I'm constantly teaching and reading Lovelace to my students - you know, Lovelace. I'm - I'm giving them Kamau, I'm giving them Linton, I'm giving them Roger Robinson, and the like. I'm expanding - I'm showing them. And, you know, it's surprising how little of Black British literature and Caribbean literature that these folks know, you know. At 20, 21 years old, it's very, very little. And it's interesting reading Lovelace to someone who's never experienced it. You can see through the eyes how the mind is expanding, and they're like, "Wow, I didn't know he could do this with language," you know. And, yeah, that's been my - that's one of the things that I've done constantly to sort of subvert and sort of infiltrate the canon as an - as an academic. Because, you know, there's so few of us. There's so few Caribbean, you know, academics that are teaching creative writing in this country. There's - There's not enough. So that's part of what I do. And in terms of how do I survive in it? I think being Caribbean has been - being a Caribbean person and a Trinidadian person has worked in my favour, you know. It's actually worked in my favour. I mean I don't want to get too much into the politics of it, but especially now and especially since what's happened with, you know, George Floyd and the - the Black Lives Matter movement, there's a feeling now, for me at least, in the field that I'm in that I suddenly have a voice and people are suddenly listening to me and people are suddenly willing to - to open doors for me in a way that, I guess, five, six years ago, it wasn't - it wasn't quite that way, you know. Yeah, I'll leave that to - there because that's - that's a whole - you know, it's a whole other debate. But, yeah, definitely now, you know, the things that I'm applying for or the things that I'm putting forward to university I work for, the ideas that I'm putting forward are readily welcomed. And, you know, I just hope it continues, man. I just hope it - it'll last.

PC Yeah, I think that that is - is - is a concern. We have had people say that, yes, there was a big change, but also there is a - a - It's like the - the wave has gone out, now it's washing back, you know.

AJ Yeah.

PC So that we do need to make sure that whatever progress is made that we hold on to it.

AJ Absolutely.

PC I'm going to indulge myself now and ask you to read a little bit from *The Frequency of Magic*. Would that be possible?

AJ Okay. This book, every - every chapter's got some sort of - you know, some naughty things going on.

PW Yes, I did notice that.

AJ Oh, gosh.

PW No, it's okay.

AJ Yeah.

PW But that's - You put it in there. I thought, you know, that was very brave or there's that very British thing of like - or what used to be said years ago is that, you know, a man thinks about sex, you know, every few seconds, so I just wondered if that was...

AJ Yeah.

PW Anyway, I'm not - I'm going to leave it there.

PC I love the fact that they let us off the hook like we don't - never mind.

AJ I mean, you know... I don't know. I just - I mean I wanted to create something that was almost... that was just naughty, you know? That was just uncompromising, you know. There's not a lot of that in Caribbean literature. I find a lot of Caribbean literature is - is conservative at times and I wanted to - I wanted to sort of challenge that.

PC May I also quote something that a critique said about you which I think is absolutely wonderful?

AJ Uh-hmm.

PC He said you are a bilingual post-modernist, amused by the possibilities of the future. I love that quotation.

AJ Oh, wow. Who said that?

PC It's on your Wikipedia page.

AJ Oh, really? Oh, gosh.

PC But I just thought that was such a lovely encapsulation of somebody who does not spend their entire time mining Black (overlapping conversation) which - which had been a touchy subject, you know.

AJ Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I'm going to read - I'm going to read a chapter here. Hopefully, there's nothing too - too rough in it. But if there is -

PC It's okay. It's a podcast.

AJ Yeah. Okay. So this is chapter 88 of *The Frequency of Magic*.

[Reading from *The Frequency of Magic*]

PC Wow.

AJ Sorry that was quite long. I mean it takes six minutes to read so you can - you can edit.

PC No, no, no, that was gorgeous. That was lovely. It's just that it's kind of like a - a - There's so many images shuffling through your sort of visual imagination as you listen.

AJ Yeah.

PC It - You kind of have to take a breath after you come out of it just to return to what we're doing.

AJ Yeah. That was the whole point that book, isn't it?

PC Yes. (overlapping conversation) you've - you've achieved (overlapping conversation).

AJ Yeah.

PC I'm going to go straight back to just a craft question now.

AJ Sure.

PC And ask you something big and general, which is what do you think are the most valuable lessons you've learned as a teller of stories?

AJ I was thinking... I was thinking earlier about that, and I think the most valuable lesson I've learnt about storytelling is something that Earl Lovelace once told me, all right? Earl Lovelace was in London. One time I invited him to - to do a conference at Goldsmiths and we were travelling - He had a reading - Queen Mary, I think, and Holloway, or something like that - and he was - We were on a bus and were travelling to this reading, and I was asking him - I was saying, "So, Earl, you know, what do you think of plot, man? You know, what about plot?" Because Earl is like a philosopher, you know. He's one of these guys that tells you really profound things in really simple ways, you know. And I said, "So how do you work with plot, man? What do you do?" And he was - He said one sentence. He said, "You know, plot is just how you tell the story." And that was it, you know. And that is something that I thought of and thought of and thought of and thought of, and sort of developed that idea that plot is just how you choose to tell the story. So in other words, the story already exists and the plot is just how you, with your individuality and your original voice, how you choose to tell it. And this has definitely been one of the things that - in - in teaching creative writing

that students really - they kind of want to really - really readily - it really opens their mind, you know. It just moves them away from trying to - to work with plot in this way that is, you know, very formulaic, like we have to have this and then this has to happen. And I'm like, "No, the plot is just how you choose to tell the story. And how do you choose? You choose because you have a particular understanding of the world and you have a way of seeing the world, and you have an idea of what you think is right, and you have a belief system about certain things, and you need to find a way of wrestling these things into the stories that you tell. And it has to be what you think, not what some other writer thinks or not what some other writer says you have to use to tell a story. You have to tell it the way you see it, and that is the plot." In other words, the plot - plot is not - plot is an effect. The plot is an effect that the reader feels. The writer doesn't work with plot. A writer just works with structure. So, yeah, sorry I'm - I'm sort of moving away from **there**, but, yeah, that was definitely it, you know. That's one of the more important things that I'd learnt about - about fiction at least.

PC And you have a story about sitting on a bus with Earl Lovelace, who's one of the leading Caribbean writers, whose characters from "Dragon" are a part of Caribbean mythology. So, yeah, you chose to tell that story. I like the plot of it very much.

AJ Yeah.

PC The next question, and this is one that we ask all the people that we talk to, what does it mean to you to be described as a Black writer? And is that a description of you yourself that you accept?

AJ That is a really tough question. I mean... You know, it doesn't really bother me. I - I have to be honest. It's never bothered me to be called that. I know a lot of people are like, "No, just, you know, call me a... Just call me a writer." I actually don't mind it. I'll explain why. Because for so long - you know, especially in the UK, I mean when I started publishing - when I started having work published, there was so few of us that were published by mainstream publishers, you know. There were so few of us. I mean this is back in the - in the early '90s. It's changed a lot now. But back then, there was really only a handful of - especially poets. There were really only a handful of poets that were being published by any sort of major publishers. And at that time, I think it was important to say that I - I'm a Black writer, I'm a Black poet. I think that was fine. So I - I came out of that whole scene. And I was happy with that. I was fine with that. I never had a problem with - with being called a Black poet or a Black writer. There are times, though, when, you know, over the years in sort of academic circles where Black is again used as a way of marginalizing or putting you into a category, you know. And that category sometimes is uncomfortable because what that category means, you know - In a lot of times in academia when they say, "These are Black poets, Black poets, or Black writers," it means that those write - those are writers that are preoccupied with identity, you know, issues, with issues around Blackness, you know, what it means to be Black. So that is

problematic because academia loves to do that. Academia loves to put you in a category where all your work somehow could be deconstructed and analyzed for - for its - its - its - what it's saying about your identity. So that sometimes has been tricky. I actually - Now I prefer to be called a Caribbean writer, you know. You know, I'm proud of that. I come from that space and it's definitely the most important geography that has, you know, influenced what I do. So, yeah, I'm cool with being, you know, a writer as well, but I think it's fine to say - You know, there's no harm in saying I'm a Caribbean writer or a Black Caribbean writer, you know. I don't have an issue with it.

PC But it's - You're also a bilingual post-modernist, so that - that works as well.

AJ Uh-hmm. Yeah. Yeah.

PW We're going to ask you -

AJ I mean people have come up with all sorts of things. Anyway, sorry, go on.

PW We're going to ask you to do a little horizon scanning now. So what might the future hold for you in particular and for Black British writing in general, or for Caribbean Black writing in general?

AJ That is a - You're asking very big questions. I mean...

PW We are.

AJ Yeah. I mean, for me, you know, I'm always - I'm always working, you know. So I have quite a few things that are happening in the next couple of years. I guess because I work across genres, you know, I'm lucky in that way in that different things are emerging at different times. They're staggered. So I have this new collection coming out in June with Bloomsbury, *Sonnets for Albert*. Right after that, I am going to start work on a new album with my band. And around that time - Some time next year there's going to be another release of some sort of an audio book for *The Frequency of Magic*, which was this really special project that I did with my whole band, the seven-piece band. We went into the studio for a week and we - The band improvised - completely improvised music and I read the whole text. So we ended up with 20 hours - Yeah, we ended up with 20 hours of music. It's incredible - It's an incredibly large body of work. So we - we're thinking about how to release that, and we might have some sort of release of that coming out this year.

And then after which I have - One of the things I'm trying to do with DMU is organize a - a festival of experimental Black writing. I'm not going to say too much more about that, but that - but that, hopefully, is going to happen in the next - next couple of year - in the next year. And on a personal level, I have another collection with Bloomsbury coming, which is going to be new and selected works, which is going to be out probably 2023, 2024. I'm not sure. So, you know, I could go on, but, yeah, there's like - You know, there's always work. There's always work. In terms of the bigger question of - of Black British literature, I mean what - I - I don't know. What I see happening is that, really, we could say now that Black British literature is part of the mainstream, you know. You know, it's not a peripheral literature any more as it used to be. When I - When I was publishing work, you know, there's no - You know, I mean I used to work at - at Waterstones and I used to run the Black British - the Black writing section, which was just a little corner on the floor. I think we've moved away from that now. And I think, you know, people like Bernardine and, you know, Roger, and all that, have expanded, you know, what it meant - what it means to be a British writer. And I think we're much more within the mainstream now, you know. And I think that's going to continue, you know. It's interesting that the experimental and the innovative and the different always finds a way to be incorporated into the mainstream. So I think what's going to happen is that there is going to be a - a substrata or a subcategory of writing, probably Black writing, and Black British writers that are going to somehow still be outside of that canon and still generate its own vibration and its own, you know, energy. We saw a lot of that happen with - happening with the spoken word - with the spoken word movement, so I think that's going to - that's going to continue. And that's - that's beautiful. That's important. We have to have something that resist the sort of all-encompassing mainstream. So I think that's what's going to happen. And I think a lot of - I mean creative writing and poetry and writing, full stop now, is become - you know, it's an economy. It's an industry. So I think we're going to see more and more people coming out of that industry who are publishing work. And, you know, there's a saying that there's - there's too much - there's too many poor writers are published, too many - too many - There are too many books that are published by people who shouldn't be published and not enough books published by people who should be published. So I think, you know, we're still going to see that continuing, you know. There's still going to be a point where we're like, well, there's so much - there's so much there, and, you know, how do we then navigate it all? And how do we choose, you know, what comes out and who read - who gets read, you know? So, anyway, those are bigger questions.

PW So we'd like to hear another poem now from *Sonnets for Albert*.

AJ Yeah.

PW Is there a - You said there was a humorous one? Can we have the humorous one?

AJ I like that. Absolutely, absolutely. So my father lived in New York for a short period of time, for a couple of years. And he lived there around the time of 9/11, and this is set in New York at that time. 'Summer in New York;.

[Reading of Summer in New York]

AJ I realise that's not that funny.

PC No, no, it -

AJ That's not humorous.

PW But that's okay. It's life.

AJ That's serious stuff.

PW It's life, yes, exactly. So we are now coming to our last question. And we like to wrap up with something positive and fun and to put you on the spot.

AJ Yeah.

PW So what is the best thing about being Anthony Joseph?

AJ That's really tricky, but I mean - Actually, to be honest, the best thing about being - being me is that I come from good people. I come from like really good Caribbean stock, you know. And it means that I'm still, you know, relatively healthy - you know, relatively healthy and relatively having a good - good outlook on life and positive and stuff like that. And I think that - that is due to, you know, the heritage, the - the genealogy that I come from. So I'm really proud and happy to be - to be descended from, you know, people who were - who are and were African, Amerindian - you know, a little bit of European splashed in there, but - but mainly Africa and indigenous America.

Yeah, that's a great thing, being able to draw on that for strength is probably the thing I'm most - I'm most happy about - about my life, you know. That's what the body is, you know. So yeah.

PC I think that's a pretty solid heritage. It goes back a couple of (overlapping conversation). Survived great beats of world history, absolutely.

AJ Exactly. Yeah.

PC That's the Caribbean, says I as a Caribbean person.

AJ That's it, that's it. Uh-hmm.

PC Anthony Joseph, thank you very much for being part of the Amplify Project.

AJ It's been a pleasure. Great questions, nice vibe.

PW Do check with our website theamplifyproject.co.uk for other podcasts in this series and for further information about Black British writing.

PC The Amplify Project is funded by Arts Council England.

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