This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Dean Atta.

Pauline Walker: Dean Atta had spent over 10 years on the spoken word circuit when, in 2012, his poem ‘I Am Nobody's Nigger’ went viral on social media, propelling him to wider recognition. His debut collection of the same name was published the following year and was shortlisted for the Polari First Book Prize. He was named as one of the most influential LGBT people in the UK by The Independent on Sunday Pink List. He's been commissioned to write poems for galleries including Tate Modern, the National Portrait Gallery and Keats House, as well as organisations such as the Damilola Taylor Trust. His first novel in verse, *The Black Flamingo* won the Stonewall Book Award, was shortlisted for the Philip Carnegie Medal, Jhalak Prize, Los Angeles Times Book Prize and Waterstones Children's Book Award. He's been a judge on the BBC's Young Writers Award. He's a National Poetry Day ambassador and LGBT+ History Month patron. Dean Atta, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Dean Atta: Oh, thank you for having me. It's a delight to be here with you both.

Patricia Cumper: That's quite an introduction. What I love, actually, is the range of it. You're talking about spoken word, then you're talking about poetry, then you're talking about novels. But we like to go to the beginning. When did words and stories come into your life?

DA: In school, in church, in my local library, and the library near my school as well. So, I've always loved reading, I loved Dr. Suess books, I loved getting to do readings in church. I went to a Church of England primary school. And so, yeah, it was quite coveted to be asked to do a reading in church or to lead a prayer. We had to learn the Lord's Prayer and we said that in assembly. So, from a young age, words and memorising, words and words that rhymed, which, you know, a lot of the Bible and prayers and hymns couldn't read like poetry. So, for me, I was used to that. I really loved reading and writing my own stories as well. My mum let me have her typewriter when she was done with it, and I started, making my own little paper and I'd draw the pictures as well as write the stories, the articles. I don't know what any of them are about now. Like I don't think I have any of them. But I loved making my own little newspaper and it was a great little hobby for me. And my neighbours would knock for me to come out and play. I'd be like, no, I'm busy making my paper. And so, I was liked, I had friends and I had people interested in playing with me, but I was interested in words, and I was interested in reading and writing. I did like video games, and I did like playing with my Action Man and my Barbie, I was into all the things that kids are into, but I was very into writing and reading. And I didn't know I was dyslexic for the whole time I was at school, which was really interesting because I had quite a trouble with homework. I found it so hard, and I didn't understand why my homework was so hard because I always wanted to make the best impression on my teachers and I always made a lot of effort. But whenever I made a spelling mistake in any piece of writing, whether it was creative writing or just answering a sheet of questions, I'd have to get the

Tipp-Ex or I'd have to do it in pencil first, so, if I made mistakes, I could rub it out and then go over it in pen. I was very meticulous, and I think all that came from not knowing I was dyslexic, but seeing I was making all these mistakes and not understanding why. And when it came to later on in life, when I was reading for English GCSE and A level like how much reading we had to do, it just didn't compute how my friends could manage it. Because I'm such a slow reader and I think that's what really put me on to poetry. Because you can read a poem quite quickly and it's got all the space around it so you don't get lost like I would in a novel. I could read the same page over and over again and sometimes not take any of it in, and it would just take me so long to read books for English. So, I'd always take the York Notes or Cliff Notes or Spark Notes, whatever abridged version of a novel I could find, because I soon realised education isn't about you really understanding the story. It's about the context around the story and the exam questions that are going to be based on a moment in the book rather than taking in the whole book in its fullness. And so, I kind of knew through uni as well, that I wasn't really required to read the books. And so, I didn't actually always read the book, but I always knew I wanted to be a writer.

I always knew I was a writer and a storyteller, even though it wasn't until I got to university I got diagnosed with dyslexia and it all made sense then when I knew I was dyslexic, and it gave me a bit of relief and respite. There was a bit of extra support, but there was also a bit more grace I had for myself. I wasn't so hard on myself anymore. I knew why I'd struggled so much with reading and writing, even though I love storytelling. And when I was performing my poetry, because I guess that's where it really began, when I started writing poetry, to perform, to do spoken word, in libraries and cafes around London, I'd go, I lived in Wembley, but I'd go to Brixton, I'd go to Hackney, I'd go wherever there was an open mic event from the age of 16 and I memorised my poems. So, then I was treating it like a performance more than a recitation. Many of the poems existed in my head and I didn't have the written down version anymore. So, as soon as I memorised it, I tossed the paper. This poem lives in me, and I did it differently every time. And it was about my engagement with the audience and be able to look people in their eyes because when I did do my first few open mics and I had it on paper, my hands were shaking, I was stumbling over my own words. But as soon as I learned to memorise it, I was really freed up and I could bring my whole self, my whole body, all the things I'd learned doing GCSE, A level drama and musical theatre that I'd done and the extra theatre school that my mum sent me to on Saturdays as well. All of that stuff came into my poetry and performance. So, it was quite fortuitous. The dyslexia forced me to become a performer of my poetry and I think that's what got me noticed with my poetry more than if I'd been trying to publish or go down the publishing route. First of all, it was the performance route, being able to put myself, my personality, my body on stage and really I make it lively for people.

PC: So, you came to poetry almost with words as an obstacle?

DA: Yes.

PC: That's amazing.

DA: Absolutely. That's it.

PC: That’s amazing.

DA: Thank you for summing it up for me so well. I wish I'd said it that way.

PC: That's absolutely fascinating. We talked to quite a few writers and that business of finding a world within words. But this is really interesting, the way that you have used your performance and physicality as a way into poetry. I love that.

DA: Thank you.

PW: I'm glad you started talking about spoken word because we wanted to know a little bit more about that. What was being part of that community like and do you call yourself a spoken word artist or you're a poet?

DA: Now, I'm a poet. I'm a writer. I'm an author. When I was younger, yes, I'd say spoken word artist, I'd say performance poet. What else were the words of the day? Some people used to call me hip hop poet. I didn't understand that because it made me feel like a failed rapper, which maybe I was to some extent. Although I just never tried to rap. My friends were into rap and grime and hip hop, and it just never took with me. I liked writing lyrics down and sometimes I thought I could rap that; I could sing that. But in the end, no, it was a poem. And every time I thought I was writing a song lyric or a rap lyric, it was a poem. And I was happy with that, especially when I came across the works of Maya Angelou and Gil Scott-Heron and also, a poet called Ursula Rucker from Philadelphia who was on one of the roots albums. So, I liked hip hop a lot, but I also, really liked spoken word poetry. And because we had access online to watching Def Poetry Jam, I think that had an influence on me.

I think going to some of the events that were happening in Brixton and Hackney and coming across people like the early iterations of Floetry and a group called Three Plus One and also Short Man and Phenzwaan and Zena Edwards and Selena Godden was doing some amazing things, and, Lemn Sissay. And it was just such a vibrant time, and so many of the people that were blowing me away were black. I was seeing a lot of poetry, but the people that stick in my mind were the black people because I think I saw myself in them. I saw myself in some of what they were talking about. Sometimes I felt alienated if it was very macho or very kind of Afrocentric in a way I didn't understand because I didn't have the reference points for yet. I felt a bit shut out of it, but it was also great for learning. I'd hear names and people would react and click and people would know what they were talking about and I'd have to go home, look up Marcus Garvey, look up certain things that I just didn't know about. School wasn't teaching me. My mum didn't know to teach me. My mum is Greek Cypriot heritage, my dad's family is Jamaican heritage, but I lived with my mum, and I had some contact with my dad's family, but not really my dad himself. And so, it was, left to my own devices to really understand my Jamaican heritage and black history as a whole outside of what they teach you at school, which was slavery and Martin Luther King.

PC: Yeah. A little Rosa Parks, if you're lucky.

DA: Little Rosa Parks. Yeah. I think in spoken word, I heard about things that I hadn't heard about in school also hearing and seeing Linton Kwesi Johnson and the political poetry that's grounded here in the UK and our Black British history. So, 'Sonny's Lettah' that blew me away, and it reframed how I saw my relationship with the police, even because I was always okay with the police, as in my dark-skinned black friends would get stopped by the police, but they just let me go. They wouldn't question me. I wouldn't get stopped and searched, but my group of friends would. And I'd be like, is it because I wear glasses? Is it because I'm small? but it was because I was lighter skinned, and that

was something that it took me ages to understand, that that was the main reason my dark-skinned friends get stopped and I didn't. But because I didn't necessarily see it that way at first, I kind of, I saw it as well, they're more boisterous than me, they're taller than me, they look older than me. That's why they're being stopped. And I didn't actually think of skin tone as a reason. And so, hearing poetry that talked about police brutality, I remember seeing this may not have been in the very early days, but Kat Francois spoke really powerfully about interactions with the police. And that really blew me away to see it from a black woman's perspective as well. And so, I just felt, yes, so much of my education happened in the spoken word scene. Not just how to perform, but stuff about our history, our shared history and things that I wasn't getting anywhere else. So, that showed me the potential of what an amazing art form it was, but what a great tool for education it was as well. And I think that's why very early, I was maybe 18, 19, 20, when people started asking me, will you come into schools and lead a workshop on poetry writing and performing? I just said yes. I didn't know how I was going to do that, but these English teachers were coming to these events and asking me into their schools, and who was I to say no. They were going to pay me some money, and I needed some money.

PC: It was good.

DA: Yeah. And it was good. I really enjoyed doing it. And the young people, because I was so close to their age, responded really well to me. But I think in my early days, I also was trying to like be liked by the students in a way that now when I go into schools, it's much more I have structure and I have my own sense of self that I don't need the kids to like me. I just know I've got an objective, which is to open their minds to what they can do, their own self-expression. And it's not about whether they like me. Not that I'm mean, I'm very nice still, but I'm not looking for validation from my students, which, when I was younger, I think I was. And I think it's nice that I've come around now to writing for young people. I'm 38, but it wasn't until I was in my mid to late 30's that I started doing this kind of writing for young people. And now when I do my school visits, I feel like a big man going into school to talk to the kids rather than a big kid trying to get these kids to like me. Do you know what I mean? So, it's a different experience now.

PC: It would seem to me that if I was observing something like that, you're probably providing the kind of inspiration for some of the people in that class that you got from Linton and Benjamin and people like that. So, it's a lovely passing on.

DA: Yeah.

PC: And that moment of recognition as a school child is so important. So, this is my next question. Partly because people take the title unto themselves in different ways. When did you first call yourself a poet?

DA: When I started university. Because I'd already done some spoken word open mics when I was doing my A levels. I'd done a gig where I opened for John Cooper Clarke, which was pretty cool. I'd been on Radio Four already, all by the age of 18. So, I knew I was a poet because I was writing poetry. And in a couple of occasions, I've been paid for that. And so, I went to uni with that confidence, and I said, hi, I'm Dean, I'm a poet. And I found the open mic at the African Caribbean and Asian Society. They were running a regular poetry open mic. And I went to that, did my thing and became a regular on that stage. And in my second year also became president of the African Caribbean and Asian Society and started running those events along with food nights, film nights,

discussions and debates and all the things you do at uni. It was great. And so, I had a great amount of confidence in the fact that I was a poet and there was no doubt about that. So, yeah, 18.

PC: That's amazing because like we said, we talked to a lot of writers, and they take it on at various times. What do you think the responsibility of being a poet is, particularly in this society?

DA: For me, it's not so much a responsibility, it's how I think it's my first language now. Like it's how when I sit down to write, you'd have to really force it to be prose. I am writing prose nowadays, but the poetry is still there for me. And I could very easily start breaking those lines and putting in line breaks in a way that would make any of my prose into poetry very easily. But for me, prose is just flattened poetry.

PC: Good prose. Good prose is flattened poetry.

DA: Yeah. And I guess because I've never written journalistically, I've never had to write a textbook. I've never, I think I've always written from a place of creativity. So, I've never had to do dry writing, even my essays, like one of my Philosophy essays. So, I did philosophy and English at university. And one of my Philosophy essays I chose to do as a dialogue between two characters that I created because I loved how that was done with Plato. And so, I was like, I'll just do a dialogue for my essay. It was my highest mark for the whole of Uni was when I did that because it was like I wrote a little play and that just worked for me. And I was really into theatre as well. I'd done acting and I continued doing acting. I was in the Drama Society at uni, and I did some acting after finishing uni as well. And I had an agent for a little while and I wrote a few plays that have been on in London venues and so, whether it was writing plays, whether it was writing poetry or short stories, it was always creative writing that it was for me. So, there isn't anything. I just don't think people I know, a lot of poets that do copywriting as their day job and they tell me it's well paid and I'd find it easy, and I'm like, but I don't want to find it easy. I want to feel fulfilled. Every day I sit down to write, I want to feel fulfilled. I don't want to do something dry, my life's too short for that, so, I just want to enjoy every time I sit down to write and not feel like a burden or just a pay check. And so, that's why I'm very picky with what projects I take on. And I have an amazing agent now who really helps me be choosy because she just helped challenge me when I need to be challenged, but channel, the opportunities in the direction I want them to go as well.

PC: Yeah, sounds good.

DA: Thanks.

PW: Can we talk about your poetry collections now? So, *I'm Nobody's Nigger*, which was published in 2013, and *There Is Still Love Here*, which came out last year. First, let's talk about *I'm Nobody's Nigger*. How did that collection come about?

DA: So, with encouragement from people like Benjamin Zephaniah, he had been seeing me do spoken word poetry. I mean, I introduced myself to him at an event and made sure he knew when I was performing and sent him stuff. We were friends on Myspace, and I used to also put stuff in his hand, like CDs of me recording my work to music. And at one point he just said, Dean, just do a book, just write a book. Because I think I've done maybe three EPS of my poetry of music, and lots of stuff online, working with different people to make videos and just share them. And for me, that felt like publishing. I actually felt like, putting a poem on YouTube or saying it to music, putting on Myspace or Bandcamp or SoundCloud I was published. And I just felt content with that because the

biggest thrill for me was actually being in front of a live audience and I was doing plenty of that. So, I felt like I was connecting with people every single time I stepped on stage and every single time I saw I'd had a few more hits on my YouTube or whatever. I knew someone had watched one of my poems and or listened. Then I had the viral poem with 'I'm Nobody's Nigger' and I think that got publishers interested, only a couple. But that interest hadn't been there before.

And being approached by publishers to put together a collection, I turned to Benjamin and asked for his advice. I also got some advice from David Lammy, who had an agent who he let me correspond with to get some advice on the contract. And we'd cross paths at some events and we just stayed in touch. And that was really lovely that he'd extended that support. I picked Saki Books, the Westbourne Press. And we did the collection.

And I think putting together the collection was strange because, like I said, so many of the poems I'd memorised, I didn't have a written copy. So, I had to write down, transcribe my memorised poems to get and then decide, okay, do they work on the page and go through an editorial process. And I think at the time, Emily Berry was actually the poet who came as a freelancer to help edit that collection. So, the publisher at Saki said, I'm not really a poetry editor, so, we'll get a freelancer to come in. And Emily's amazing and I really love her work. And we all only had corresponded by email. And then later on I met her and I was like, you actually edited my work. This is amazing to meet you. And I didn't know who you were. You were just a woman called Emily who was sending me notes and now you're this person and I know who you are. That's so cool because I didn't know the page poetry world. That was the thing. I wasn't sending work into journals or magazines. I didn't know even, like, Wasafiri. And I think if I had known Wasafiri, I'd have been sending them stuff, but I didn't even know that existed. And that is something that is for someone like me. I was just in the most innocent way. Like, I was ignorant to it all, I didn't know.

And it was amazing when then the collection was ready and published the doors that opened, because I didn't know about literature festivals. I didn't know how much more schoolwork or being asked to go to universities and do events and readings. Like I just didn't know how much more would be available and an option for me. And suddenly I was like, will you fly to this country? Will you come over here, come over there? And it was just shocking that I'd been perfectly content doing London and Brighton spoken word scene, occasionally going to Birmingham or maybe Manchester, but then suddenly it was everywhere, South Africa, Germany. It was just really intense. And I was also doing a master's degree at the same time. So I couldn't even take up all the opportunities that came my way. So, I was doing a writer teacher MA at Goldsmiths because I just wanted to be a bit more grounded in how I did my education work. And so, this course was run by Peter Khan and Jacob Sam-La Rose worked on it as well. And we were looking at how poets could go into schools and do long-lasting work with groups of young people. And so, some of the other writers on that Keith Jarrett, Raymond Antrobus. So, it was really cool to work alongside them and to be in a school for a longer period of time, because I was used to doing these one-off workshops, but now I was doing this long-term commitment. But it meant I could only go on these trips abroad or in school holidays so it was really limited but I still did it. I went to St. Lucia with John Agard and I did some really cool stuff.

PW: Very cool.

DA: Very cool stuff. And it was actually John that then helped open the door to doing the YA, because he was like, you know, you should write for young people specifically, because even though

I'm Nobody's Nigger got used in schools. And it was only by very brave teachers that could, handle discussing the N word and also, institutional racism and the slave trade in the way that I'm talking about it and it's kind of ongoing impact. Because I think they like to put the slave trade away in history and not talk about its ongoing impact on our lives today. So, I think it's quite a challenging poem, but a lot of brave teachers did take it on. But I knew that there was many teachers that told me, I couldn't, I wish I could, but I just can't get this past my senior leaders to bring your poem in. So, I'm really sorry. Or they'd say, you can come in, but you've got other poems you can use. And I did have other poems I could use, so, that was fine. I didn't mind. I didn't feel censored. I was just like, well, I'll come in, I've got lots more to say. I've got lots of other poems, but that for a long time was the star of the show. You know, I'm Nobody's N word. Like, I'd go and do gigs. And I did a gig in South Africa, where I'd done several gigs on the trip in Johannesburg and in Cape Town. And in one of the maybe five gigs I did, it was the fifth gig, in fact, and I was like, I just didn't do I'm Nobody's N word because I was sick of saying it. And I got off the stage, I'd done a full set of poetry, and they were like, you didn't do the N word poem. Like you need to come back on and do it. And I was like, I don't want to. They're like, no, we brought you all this way. You have to do it. And it was like, oh, it's not the body of my work they want, it's this poem. So, for a long time, I felt like I was in the shadow of one poem. But then when I wrote The Black Flamingo, I felt like everything opened up again. And there was a whole new conversation to be had with this book about a boy doing drag and the intersections of his blackness and queerness. And it just wasn't really a new start, but it reinvigorated me in my passion for like having a new piece of writing that could take the spotlight.

PC: I wanted to ask you one thing about it. Now, I have a very weird habit. If I'm reading in advance of a podcast, if it's poetry, I read it aloud. Just me, nobody else in the room. And it seemed to me, some of it came off the page and felt as though it was to be read out loud. And then there was sort of the second half of the book, felt much more to me like, this is I poetry.

DA: I think the first half, they were pieces I'd performed a lot.

PC: Because they do, they sing in the mouth. And then the other ones, I'm definitely having to think these words have been said together. These words have been thought together. If that makes sense to you?

DA: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I think it's been a long time since I've like reflected on that collection. So, it's nice that someone's come to it fresh and kind of thinking about that divide or kind of that kind of difference of tone, perhaps, as well. And I think, yeah, they were poems that, when you do spoken word, you know, you have to get people straight away. So, I think everything at the front of the book is the ones that get people straight away. And there'd be the poems that I'd either begin a set with or end a set with so, I might put some of those other poems somewhere in the middle of a set when I've got the audience's, you know, trust and got them listening to me. I didn't structure the book that way, though. I kind of just put all the hits at the front and then like at the back it was like the love poems, the kind of more kind of contemplative work that kind of is at the back of *I'm Nobody's Nigger*. And yeah, it's an interesting collection because I think I'd had, I won't name names, but I had some of my mentors none of the names I've said already, but say, I don't think you're ready to put a book out. You should wait a bit longer, you know. People that read the manuscript as well, they're like, you know, maybe in a couple more years you can put this out. Just take your time. You only get one first collection. But I was like, I'm going to write many books, and it's okay if, you don't think it's the kind of pinnacle of what I'm going to achieve. It's not. I'm going

to achieve much more than this. And I think for me, I wanted to have my first collection at that time because I felt ready and I didn't know what I was ready for. But I just felt ready, and I wanted to get it out. And if Benjamin was telling me I was ready, I was like, that's enough for me, right?

PC:. I found *There is (still) Love Here*. It's very honest, it's very direct, and it's very touching. And it felt that you were unafraid to show how your vulnerabilities, you're quite ruthless at seeing both of the good and the bad in something at almost the same time. How did you put that collection together?

DA: I put *There is (still) Love Here* together, based on love as the central theme, I guess, and thinking about love in different ways. So there's poems about self-love, there's poems about family love, romantic love, and a love for your kind of community and your heritage as well. So, when I lay them out, because I had probably double, if not three times the amount of poems I was picking from to bring that collection into being. I was laying them out and seeing what spoke to each other and what felt like a repetition and then it was okay, what's the better way of saying this? Or, what's the way that works for me? Because, you know, there are certain themes I do write over and over again, and whether that's being mixed race, whether that's being gay, whether that's like my dad not being around, whether that's kind of breakups and one-night stands. And, you know, there were certain things that felt like they spoke to one another. And my grandfather had died, and that felt like a strong theme. Another friend of mine had died of cancer, and I'd spent time by her bedside, and it was grief had come up as a theme, even, like the fear of losing other people was a theme. And I think we were in lockdown when I was putting it together. So, there was a huge amount of uncertainty and missing my family because I was living in Scotland whilst my family are all in London. And so, I felt far away, even though it's not that far, it was far enough that I couldn't make those trips, you know, without breaking the law at the time, little did I know. Yeah, the Conservative Party were breaking all the laws. So, I just felt like it was a pressure cooker for me, all the things compacted, and it was just about refining because I had so much, I could have said in that collection, and I just had to think about what was most important to say. So, there were other poems about grief that I chose not to put in. There were other poems about my relationship that I chose not to put in. There was a lot to pick from of the topics I've got in there. There's probably three or four poems that were almost duplicates of each other because I was just trying to figure myself out. And it's really interesting because the drafts, they're not drafts of the same poem. They're all separate poems. But, you know, I just was trying to come at things from lots of different angles. And eventually I chose the ones I chose, but then the others could have formed another book. And so, it was just that, it was what speaks to each other, what's a nice journey to take the reader on. And because, I'd by this point written two novels in verse for young adults, I had a sense of wanting this poetry collection to have an arc or a story. Even if it wasn't completely narrative or chronological, I still wanted a sense of story. As someone went through the book, [I] tried to lay it as a circle at first, can it go back on itself? But in the end, I realised it was spiralling out. Initially I thought, is there a really neat way that the beginning poem and the end poem could be like a record that you're going to listen to over and again? You know, just putting an album on repeat, which I have done with many albums, but in the end, it doesn't quite go back to itself because I'm changed and maybe the readers changed a bit, and so, it kind of spirals out.

PC: So, instead of music as your inspiration, you use theatre, because theatre is supposed to be different at the end of the arc, I would say?

DA: Yes. Exactly.

PC: There you go. Would you read us something from There is (still) love here?

DA: Two black boys in paradise. [DB reads the poem]

PW: Oh, that's lovely.

DA: Thank you.

PC: Thank you very much.

PW: So, you've mentioned earlier before about your heritage, Jamaican and Greek Cypriot heritage. It's a theme that you explore in your work along with being gay. What do these multiple identities mean to you and to your art?

DA: They're just so rich. There's so much Jamaican, you know, history, culture, food, music, stories that I've heard, stories that I've had to piece together from family, you know, that I've overheard when I was too young to hear them. You know, there's just so much going on in my, you know, Jamaican family that I'm still kind of trying to understand. And then there's so much with my Cypriot family that I literally don't understand because I didn't speak the language. I don't speak Greek, or I've been learning Greek all my life, it seems, but no one ever taught me, though, you know, I tried to do a little class when I was maybe 15, but all the other kids were 6 and 7 years old. I felt too embarrassed to be there. I tried again when I was at university doing an evening class and everyone was much older than me and it was fine, but I didn't stick it out. I've done online learning with it and I'm slowly, slowly getting there. Or siga, siga they say slowly, slowly in Greek. So, I'm getting there. And the language has been the big kind of preoccupation for me. I felt fully immersed in the culture. I went to Cyprus most summers and I spent a lot of time with my Greek Cypriot grandparents who lived here for most of the time and then moved to Cyprus in their late retirement, and then, they've both passed away now. And so now I'm kind of figuring out my relationship to Cyprus without them, which is a different thing. And then with my gay and LGBT heritage community that I'm part of, I've been really blessed in terms of people a bit older than me that have kind of really encouraged me and nurtured me and given me books to read or kind of opportunities. So, people like Thomas Campbell and Ajamu X and Campbell X and Lady Phyll who have all, in one way or another, and Ricky Beadle-Blair, gosh, I can't forget Ricky Beadle-Blair, have given me such encouragement and such, you know, inspiration in what they do and how they've invited me into certain spaces. So, I feel like that's been huge blessing. The creativity of queer people, black queer people, in particular, has been hugely inspiring to me and I feel like I'm in conversation with that too, people my age and younger as well, like Keith Jarrett and Travis Alabanza, Jay Bernard, that kind of conversation that I feel like we're having with one another in our work and just in person as friends, it's just really wonderful to be part of. So I feel like my contemporaries and my forebears, so much inspiration, so much support. I just feel lucky to have all of that to draw from because it's like a deep well, right? It's a deep, deep, deep well.

PC: I'm going to ask you something about the other side of that because a lot of writers are, and sometimes, I feel it in your writing, I may be completely wrong, that you're almost like an outsider looking in sometimes. And it's that, when I studied anthropology, they had this concept of liminality,

which is, you know, the shore. It's neither land nor sea, but it's an extremely powerful place. And I wondered if that sense of otherness of being slightly an outsider, is that a powerful place to write from?

DA: I think it's a powerful position to take for your reader. Because I'm part of so much, you know, but I don't think a reader could fully occupy my fullness, you know, I sometimes need to take a position to show them something. Because how do you see both the land and see if not at the shore? For me, I sometimes position myself so I can look over here and then look over there but I know it's all me. And that for me is positioning, giving kind of a certain lens at a certain time for the reader to be able to see what I want to show them.

PC: Thank you, that's really lovely. So, essentially, it's what I bring to your writing, what you've written is also me in a strange way.

DA: Absolutely.

PC: By taking various positions, you're also showing me that I am taking positions.

DA: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PC: Fascinating. I didn't think of that at all.

DA: But I know sometimes I'm asked for more of one or the other. Like if I write something that's more about being gay, someone's like, oh, but where's your blackness in this particular piece? You know, where's the challenge of being gay and black? Like what would your Jamaican, you know, family say about this? Or when I write about being in Cyprus and amongst my Cypriot family but I might not have said enough about the fact that I'm black. Or like people are like, oh, but what about this and what about that? When I say people, it's often like a dissertation supervisor or an editor or, I mean, they are people but they've got a certain goal to what they're trying to achieve. When they give you this kind of advice, I think the reader accepts what you put in print and they like it or they don't like it, but they don't tell you should have done it differently. I've never come across a reader of my book saying you should have done more of this or more of that. Unless, actually, we'll come to that later but the teenagers have opinions on what should have happened but that's more about story. And that's not necessarily about how much of one or the other identity is in the story, it's just like but what happened then? Who did he end up with? Or what happened in the relationship? Or did they become friends again? Like, they're so invested in the story, they want to know more but when it's in terms of the position or the kind of the identity of the character or the narrator or the I in the poem. I find the questions come from editors and maybe sometimes fellow writers in workshop groups, but once I've put it out, it's just accepted for what it is.

PW: How do you feel about being labelled as a black writer or a black gay writer?

DA: Yeah, it's accurate. I feel that, that is suitable. I feel that is a good shorthand, you know, for people to know, because not every poem or page of every story I write says I'm black and gay. So, if you know that ahead of time, then you know the lens through which, I'm writing. And that might kind of explain some things or help you understand where I'm coming from off the bat and without me having to start from scratch every time. Like I think knowing who wrote a book gives you a sense of how to enter it. If we picked up books and they didn't have authors names on, I think it'd be you'd spend a lot of time early on quite confused as to how you should take what's being said. Or

the writer would have to be very expositional in the very early parts of every book because they'd have to position themselves. Whereas my name and, if people know who I am but like my name will position me now because I've got certain things attached. The other books and my own biography is attached to my name. So, now anything that Dean Atta puts out will have its own history and therefore a way to read it, which I feel amazed by because I've published four books, but like five and six will come out both next year. And so, I feel like that I've got a body of work now, and so, people can start to see the commonalities between books and being black and gay is a big theme across all of my writing. So, I feel like it's accurate.

PW: Yeah. You're part of that canon.

DA: Oh, yeah. I mean, well, I wasn't thinking about cannons, but just yeah, it's a descriptor. But yeah, like the canon is such a contested thing, so, I wouldn't know where the canon stopped, so, I'd keep including people in my canon, you know, whoever is writing, you know, or has written.

PW: Yeah, we do. We believe in the growing canon.

PC: I'm going to ask you to talk about your two YA novels.

DA: Oh, yes, finally. I've been hinting the whole time.

PC: *The Black Flamingo* and *Only on the Weekend*s. So, you tell your stories in verse?

DA: Yes.

PC: But it is a novel. What were the challenges? How does it differ from, you know, the other work is an expansion. Tell us about how you put those together.

DA: So, *The Black Flamingo* started as one poem, a three-part poem, and it's a moment that kind of falls within the book somewhere in the middle, when Michael, the main character is Michael. He's of the same identity as me. He's mixed race, Greek Cypriot and Jamaican. He's in Cyprus visiting family and there's a flamingo sighting, the black flamingo sighting, and that inspires him because that for him, the fabulousness of this creature that's like the others, but stands out and really kind of captures his imagination. And he feels like, you know, in his family, he's always stood out. And on the gay scene, not that he'd been on the gay scene, but I had been on the gay scene. You know, I always felt like I stood out as a black person in predominantly, like, white gay spaces. And so, for me, *The Black Flamingo* was just acknowledging how I'd felt. I felt confident in my identity, but I knew I still was othered. We talked about that just earlier. I felt othered in some spaces and I wanted to capture that. So, the three-part poem was initially the sighting of the flamingo, then a reflection in the second part, wanting to be a pink flamingo and just fit in and be a wrapping paper pattern just like all the rest. And then concluding with the grandfather saying to Michael, why does it matter that he's black? The other flamingos don't care. And Michael realising grandad, saying, I love you and I accept you, I would extend the meaning of that to be as well. And so, that was just its own thing. And I performed that poem quite a bit, and I was doing drag and it became part of my drag act. And I was doing a residency at Tate Britain, and I got it on the walls of Tate Britain, and I was working with my friend Ben Connors, and he was illustrating it. I was generating new material in that space as well. So, it was like a six-week kind of open studio at Tate where I was writing and people could come in and like talk to me about my process. But I also had made worksheets with Ben for people to write their own poems about their identity. And we put together a zine that had

writings about people's identity, either using animals or using different ways of writing about who you are, where you come from, what makes you, you. And people did illustrations as well. And we did performances at Tate, and we had, you know, Travis Alabanza, Lasana Shabazz, Keith Jarrett, Remi Graves, like, loads of cool people come and do their thing. And it was amazing.

And then out of that, I had a bigger body of work, which I thought was going to be a poetry collection. And then it was the same time I met an agent. And my agent was like, have you considered a novel in verse? And I was like, no, I have not. I don't want to write a novel. I'm dyslexic. And so, it just seemed like a big undertaking. And it wasn't until we went and met with an editor, that had basically the key to unlock it for me, was handing me another book. So *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo and that is a novel in verse set in New York, a Dominican girl in New York and she just tells her story through poetry and I just saw it and I could understand it. And it's not that I hadn't seen novels in verse, I just hadn't seen one that was one YA or that was just so similar to what my voice was or what I knew I could do and so, it was just like, oh, I can do that. And so, I just set about with this editor to do it and John Agard was actually at Hachette and it was an editor at Hachette, and he had really sung their praises and had encouraged me to do this writing for young people. But he also had said other things like don't get boxed into just writing about being black and gay. But I didn't listen to that piece of advice because I like writing about being black and gay and I love John, but that advice, I think, is his own fears for me, you know, or maybe a generational thing of like don't get boxed in. But I actually like this box, and there's so much I can do in it.

And so I'm fine right now with writing on these specific themes. But yeah, it took a while to find its shape because I was very wedded to certain poems and I wasn't going to change them and so, we kind of had to find the way to make the story work around the poems rather than write the story and then write poems for the story. So, it was a bit of a backwards process because I was sticking to my guns on certain pieces being perfect in my eyes. And so we just kind of had to piece it together like a jigsaw puzzle. And we got there and it was really interesting because it's so easy to read from because some of the poems do stand alone because they were written as standalone poems. And so, even though they fully now weave into a story, I can just open a page of *The Back Flamingo* and just read it.

With my second novel, I wrote it knowing I was writing a story and story was kind of first and foremost, so it's actually harder to just find a page and read from. It is still written in verse, but it's very interwoven and there's not a lot of standalone moments. It's kind of like just building this story and these characters and their kind of relationships and so, there's a few parts that I could pull out but not many. And it's yeah, it was a different way of writing. I kind of knew the whole story before I even started writing it and I could see the landscape. I set it in Scotland because I was living in Scotland at the time, so, I could see everything really vividly and the characters just came to me fully formed, and none of them were like me, per se, you know. Whereas Michael was, you know, same heritage as me, very similar family structure, everything. Yeah, like, the main character, Mac, in *Only on the Weekends*, he's Nigerian. He's got a single dad. I didn't have a dad around. He has single dad. So, I had to write about a father son relationship, which was pure imagination on my part. And then, you know, the two love interest ones, Egyptian boy and the others, a trans Scottish, Glaswegian white boy. I had to have many sensitivity readers because I was writing so many things outside of my own experience. And that was really fun. And it was great to do all the research and to like watch things and read things to kind of get a sense of who these characters were telling me they were. I kind of trusted these characters because they were about, they were based on people I

knew and had encountered, but I still had to make them my own. I had to do this research. I couldn't just copy people from real life because that's not very creative. And so, but I have the pleasure of handing it to my friend who I based the Egyptian character on, and him being like, oh, wow. And it was just really interesting to have that experience of drawing on life, but then kind of making it your own. Which I did, to some extent, with *The Black Flamingo*, but I felt like *The Black Flamingo*, I was writing it for me for my younger self, to redress, you know, some of the things I was missing out on when I was a teenager. You know I grew up with Section 28, which was a law that meant they couldn't promote homosexuality in school and there would be no LGBT books and there were no teachers coming out. And I was the only kid in my school that came out when I was there. So, it was a lonely time. I didn't have role models, and the stuff that was out there just wasn't reaching me because my school library wouldn't be stocking James Baldwin or, do you know what I mean? So I just had no idea what was already written, what was already out there. I just hadn't accessed it or I was denied access to it because of Section 28. So, for me, I knew I was writing in a different time when this would reach young people. And so in *The Black Flamingo*, for example, I've got a whole list, litany of names of black queer people towards the end of the book because I knew I couldn't fit everyone in, in their fullness. But if I put all their names, those that are interested could look up all these really inspiring people that inspire me. And in turn, I made inspirations for Michael, the character in the book. So, in that way, I saw that book as a conversation with my younger self and a conversation with the kind of, like, black queer kind of community at large. *Only on the Weekends* was just a different, different undertaking. It was more an exercise in craft. Like, I wanted to write a romance, but I wanted to make it a love triangle. I wanted to make it a bit messy and queer and like unpredictable. And I wanted this black gay character to have the choice of two boys because I didn't have one when I was a teenager. So I thought, give him two to pick from. Make it like, because you see all these kind of romcoms and these kind of love triangle goals for like straight characters that are teenagers, but you rarely see it for queer characters. So, I just thought, a queer love triangle, that's what I want to do and I want to write romance. I never had thought about writing romance, but I just thought, this will be fun. And it was. It's a lot of fun.

PC: I'm really interested when you use the word craft. Because to me, there's such a distinction between art, which is the thing you generate from your soul, and then craft is the thing you apply to make it wonderful. And I think when you speak to older writers, certainly craft has been the thing that's got them from the beginning to being able to have a career. So, I'm really interested when I hear you use the word craft about this particular story and that it is story driven. Yeah. That's really interesting.

DA: I feel like you just told me, I'm growing up.

PC: I'm old enough to say these things.

DA: Thank you.

PW: Can we hear an extract from one of the novels?

DA: *The Black Flamingo* is definitely a conversation with my younger self. And this, I think, is the key piece of advice from the book that I would give my younger self. So, how to come out as gay? [DA reads a poem]

PC: You'll make me cry now. Yeah, that's absolutely lovely. Thank you.

DA: Thank you.

PW: So, you won an award for that, and you've won many awards. So, does it make a difference being celebrated and recognised?

DA: Well, I was thinking when I was reading that poem with the reference to *Beautiful Thing*, which is a film that's set here in the UK and then *Moonlight*, a film set in the US. And both really important. I think *Beautiful Thing*, still watched today are still very important. But at that time when it first came out was so important. Then *Moonlight* had a big moment when it came out and won an Oscar. And I was thinking about how I've straddled, in terms of cultural inferences UK and US, as well as Jamaica and Cyprus, but I think I was really shocked to win the Stonewall Book Award because the book had just come out, if it had even come out in America, when it won the award. And so I knew I was going to be published in America, but the magnitude of what that would mean really hadn't hit me yet. And it was like I was being published for the first time all over again, because I just didn't know how big it could be to be published in America. And the Stonewall Book Award. I knew what Stonewall was. I knew about the Stonewall riots in '69, and I'd heard of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Johnson and the Stonewall Inn, but I didn't know there was an award named after the Stonewall Book Awards. I didn't know it was the American Library Association. I didn't know what a big deal that was. And so when they told me I was shortlisted for it, I was like, wow, what an honour. Because I knew you got a badge on your book even if you were nominated or shortlisted. So, I knew my book, now in America would be printed with that badge on, and I'd seen The Poet X and various other books with these badges that they print on the front covers of the US copies of books. And so, I was like, I'm going to get a badge. That's all I thought about. I didn't think I'd win the award, but my book will have a badge on it. And then they told me not so long after that I'd won it and I couldn't tell anyone. And I was sitting on this knowledge that I'd won something huge, because I then looked it up and I was like, this is huge.

And I just was, I don't know what to do with this, because this is my debut novel and my first time being published in America in this way. And I've just come in from the UK and won this big American award. And I looked at who else was up for it and I read some of their books and this is just mind blowing. I think it was the honour of it kind of grew with the knowledge of what it was. At first, I was just like, that's cool, but then when I looked into it all and really pieced all the pieces together, it's Stonewall, it's the American Library Association, all these other great writers have been shortlisted as well. This is a big deal, you know.

The honours mean something because you also then know people are going to be reading it. More people will pick it up because of this badge on the front. More people hear this about this award will be like, okay, it must be good. I've read books that have won this award in the past, and so, you know, I'll read this one too. It's the lineage that it becomes part of and it's the extra eyes it will be in front of. And some schools will just order the books because they've won this award, and that is just really cool. I think the same with being shortlisted for the Carnegie here in the UK, the Philip Carnegie Medal, and then things that I just I don't even know, like when people tell you, the LA Times one. I was like, this just seems a bit absurd; it's too many awards. Or when it was on the Time Magazine's 100 Greatest YA books of all time. And I was like, how old is YA? And I had to just try and downplay it by being, maybe YA is new and that's why, you know, I'm one of the 100. But actually, no, they're actually taking in quite a big range of books and a big-time span. And I was like,

this book must be good if people seem to be giving it all these awards. And I think that's one way of measuring if a book is doing well.

But the other, is the amazing letters I get from young people. Sometimes they come in sacks of mail because the teachers ask their students to write about what the books meant to them. And you can tell they've been told to write a letter, but then what they actually put in the letter is just so heartfelt and how the books meant something to them. And then I get a lot of messages on social media, which I can't reply to, messages from young people; it's just too complicated. But I see them and I'm just so grateful that so many young people reach out and tell me that they either found the book themselves, got gifted it, or studied it in school and what it's meant to them and the confidence it's given them. So many people with *The Black Flamingo* see themselves in Michael, and he's so specific to me. He's black, he's queer, he's Greek Cypriot, Jamaican, he does drag. But people who have all sorts of stories that just felt different in whatever way, say, I saw myself in that because I felt those moments where I felt in between, or I felt like I didn't quite fit in, or it took a while to find my tribe or find my flock, find my people. And I think that's what this book is about; *The Black Flamingo* is about; it may take time to find your tribe and to find the people that you fit in with. And Michael does a lot of trial and error, and he compares himself to Goldilocks at one point, too hot, too cold, not right, don't fit in, not black enough, not gay enough, whatever it is. And he keeps going, but he's got great support, and I think that's something I wanted to show the difference that supportive family and friends can make to someone who's struggling to find their place, because at the end of the day, he does have a place, he has a home, he has friendship, but he wants people like him. And I think that we all want to see some people like us and be able to relate to people in certain ways. And I think, for some of us, it's harder than it is for others, because some people are overly represented in the media and in books and in the education system. And some of us are very much underrepresented in the media and books and education.

PC: And I think giving Michael such a specific identity also makes him safe. You know, when things are general, nobody's going to actually engage in quite the same way, but because he's so specific, it actually means that you can safely. That was what I found; that he became very specific. I could engage with him, but through him I could see other things that were happening.

DA: Great.

PC: My question is, and you may have answered this to some extent, would you call yourself a literary activist? Is that the right way of describing the way you engage with your work and with other people?

DA: No, I don't call myself an activist at all. I don't think, maybe I have in an interview in the past, but I wouldn't these days. I'm a writer, like and I think my stories speak to ongoing struggles, that were happening before I was born and will continue after I die. But it's in conversation and where I can I try and acknowledge who I might be following in that conversation, but sometimes it doesn't fit for a story to reference everything, I can't show all my workings. I guess that's why we have these conversations, but I think, I know that I'm not the only one telling black quiz stories, but I know that I might be the first black quiz story some people pick up. So, that's a bit of pressure, but also a great privilege. And I hope I open people up to wanting to find out more about people like me. And that's something I feel really honoured to have that position. But obviously there's some pressure that comes with that too, because I know I can't represent all black queer people. That's an impossible ask of anyone, but I know I can through tricks like all the names mentioned in *The Black Flamingo*,

like signposts. There's so many more of us. And I think, one of my big passion projects would be to put together an anthology of black queer poetry at some point, because I feel like there's a lot of people I know and know of that I'd love to see in one collection together.

PC: Well, any publishers listening to this? Here is a project for you. That would be lovely. Particularly if you manage, okay, this is just my interest, but how the language has changed over time, whether there is a liberating of language or type of language?

DA: Yeah, I'd love to see, like, a Labi Siffre poem next to a Travis Alabanza poem, you know what I mean?

PW: How does a poet make a living? I think you've touched on it a little bit before. You don't just write poetry, but you're working in schools.

DA: Yes. So, the school workshops were a big way for me to make a living. It was particularly, all year round, but it really picked up for Black History Month in October and LGBT History Month in February and I'm happy to do both. I am an LGBT History Month patron now and I do think that's an important time of year for us to kind of have a focal point on LGBT history and stories and achievements. And I think the same of Black History Month, but I do like to see these things woven in all year round in school and in workplaces and wherever it's used as a kind of focal point, I don't think it should be bookended, like begin and end, in that one month. I'd get a lot of work in those periods. And now that I'm published, a couple of books, I'd get author visits. So going in and just talking about my books and taking questions and giving advice about being a writer and getting into writing and publishing. And that's really lovely and a real privilege because I'm not being asked to talk about the whole of LGBT history or the whole of Black history, I'm just focusing on what I've written and my own experiences, so it feels a bit more manageable. But then now, it is mostly the writing is how I make a living, because I've been published in America and because there are some translations and because *The Black Flamingo* has been optioned for TV. And so those things put a bit more money in the bank. And my agent really has really helped navigate that and helped me figure out how to make it so that I can spend most of my time writing, yeah, that's what I do. And so now it's like fitting in the school visits and the festivals around protecting my writing time. I have to have certain times where I say, no, I'm not available for the next month, two months and I'm just going to be writing. And sometimes I go away on writing retreats and sometimes I just turn off my computer, well, turn off the internet and just put the out of office on the email and do what I need to do. But yeah, the school visits were important.

I feel like I love it, but I have to not be there thinking about, oh, but I should be at home writing. So I only go and do them when I can give my full attention and full energy to doing the visit and even if the visit is just one hour in the day, that whole day is about the school visit for me. I want to feel prepared and I want to feel actually able to give so much and then to be able to decompress, because a lot comes up in a school visit. I have young people coming out as gay, bi, trans. I have young people talking about maybe they've been bullied, maybe they've going through some stuff at home. I always have teachers present with me in those kind of conversations, but I hear a lot and the young people see me as this kind of safe person to, in the best possible way, offload because they've never had an adult listen to them and be frank with them in the way, I'm quite frank in my author visits. I'm quite frank in general. I don't have the pressure a teacher has, maintaining a persona, the educator, the disciplinarian, all the things a teacher has to be. It's so many things.

Whereas I come in, I'm Dean, I write books, and I'm very much myself. And I think you should be, too. Like, I'm sorry, like.

PW: Absolutely.

PC: That's really lovely to hear that your writing is doing most of the making a living now. That's a huge mark of success, I think, because so often so many writers do a lot of other things in order just to have the time to write. So, congratulations on that.

DA: Oh, thank you.

PC: I get to ask the penultimate question, which is, it's kind of asking you just to do a little horizon scanning for yourself. What's next? You did say something about two more books. We won't ask you if you don't want to say any more than that.

DA: Oh, yeah, they've both been announced.

PC: But what do you think is in the future for writers, for poets? There's AI kind of lurking around, you know. There are all sorts of other pressures. Where do you think we're going?

DA: I think, oh, where are we going? It would have been easier to answer the question about where I'm going before answering where we're going.

PC: (Overlapping Conversation) Let me rephrase it in a different light then.

DA: I mean, I'll start with me and then I can think about everyone else because I know what I'm doing. So, I'm going to be publishing a children's picture book in January called Confetti, and that's inspired by my two nieces, Arie and Andy. It was inspired by a real moment with them, but then I've taken lots of creative liberties and there's even the uncle in the book gets married. I'm not married, but like, I'm wishing if he's listening, but yeah. Also, I've got my first memoir, which, you know, it took a while to be convinced to write a memoir, and I had to speak to Lemn Sissay to like be convinced that I could write one, because *My Name is Why*, his memoir really blew me away. It's also, my memoir is going to be with Canongate as well. I spoke to him about how to go about doing that, and it was to really focus. He said he focused on a time period in his life. I focused on a theme of the body, so, I'm writing a memoir of the body and actually it's a huge theme when you really think about it. And so, like, I've written this book and we're going through redraft after redraft, but it's shaping up really nicely and it's going to be published in May next year as well. So, I have those two books out next year and then another picture book will follow in 2025.

I've also got one of my poems that I read 'Two Black Boys in Paradise' is being turned into a stop-motion animation. It's been funded by the BFI and that should be ready next year. It's being made in a studio in Manchester by One6th productions and they're doing amazingly. I've been to visit and I've seen the little puppets of the two black boys and all the set of paradise and it's just the most beautiful thing. So that will tour film festivals next year as well. And if I've got space, I want to go to as many of those screenings and kind of create a moment around black queer people on screen. They're animated bodies. It's just amazing showing black queer bodies and stories and romance and love in this beautiful form. And so, yeah, for me, that's it. I want these books as well to be in conversation with all the other books that are being published. I love the opportunity when I'm asked who do you want to be on a panel with? You know, finding out who else has a book that we

can have great conversations with and how we can champion each other. And I think that is where I think we're going.

The we, for me in this moment, would be black writers. I'm a member of the Black Writers Guild and the we, there are hundreds of black writers who have, you know, a real passion to support one another, but also, to change the industry, to be more reflective of our interest as well as the market interest and the longevity of writer's careers. I feel really inspired by Bernardine Evaristo and Patrice Lawrence and so many people who keep writing and keep publishing and Malorie Blackman and I want to have a long career and I want so many of us who maybe have had opportunities more recently to get 1st, 2nd, 3rd book published to keep going whether or not that book sells well or not, just being given another chance to keep writing, keep working on our craft, keep writing stories that matter to us and not be put in the box unless we like it there. I like my box and I'm filling the box of black queer stories because I've got so many in me, but if I want to branch out, I will. I don't want anyone to feel boxed in, but I don't think there's a limit to how many black queer stories one can tell. And so, that's for me, where I'm going, I just want to keep telling stories and see my peers flourishing beside me and also to see people getting their flowers. There was a lovely moment in the Black Writers Guild conference this year where literal flowers were given to people like Sandra Agard and Patrice and Bernardine and several others who had done so much for the community, not just this year, but over the years. And just, I think saying people's names, acknowledging them and supporting them.

PC: In an odd way, amplifying them.

DA: Amplifying them. We brought it back to the title of the show.

PC: There You go. Absolutely.

DA: Absolutely.

PW: So, now we've come to our final question, which is, what are the best things about being Dean Atta?

DA: Oh, my gosh. I think my mum is the best thing about being me. You know, she made me and she stands by me and supports me and I think it just never ceases to amaze me, whether it's my mum, my grandma, my grandmas on both sides, just the women that have really championed me. I look around sometimes and I'm just really amazed by the women that have been in my corner or on my side for so long. Malika Booker, who is Malika's poetry collective and Malika herself, been pivotal in my poetry career and my YA, because Malaika was a huge help with *The Black Flamingo* and I just think I'm just really lucky to have been supported, whether it was from my mother or aunties that have designated themselves aunties as well, people that just kind of step in and say, yes, I've got you. I've been really blessed and I think, I guess I say all this to say because as a gay man, I don't have romantic relationships with women, but I have just these incredible relationships with women where I just feel, because we, and I kind of see myself sometimes in women's stories often as well. And whether it's in my mother's story, in my grandmother's stories, and the women that I look up to, I just sometimes feel like there's a real kinship there. I don't know how to explain that other than what I've said, but it's just been, yeah, when I look at my life, I just see so many amazing women supporting me. And I just want to say that and mention that because it's been really sustaining, and I don't know, I just wrote a poem recently about my Jamaican granny. I was asked to do it for Windrush '75 and there's going to be an event rap party and Inua Ellams puts

together, and they wanted to do one with Caribbean writers, and Raymond Antrobus is hosting it and I've written a poem about my granny, and I've been really reflecting on the role so many women have had in shaping me and encouraging me when sometimes, I don't know, the men were just silent, but the women gave actual verbal encouragement and affection and made me feel safe. And, you know, I think strong and silent men, that's a role, but I think vocal advocates and vocally affirming and affectionate women is what I've needed and what I've really relied on.

PC: Dean, thank you very, very much for being on The Amplify Project.

DA: Thank you.

PC: And as two very strong and supportive women -

PW: Yes.

PC: - it's been a blessing to talk to you.

DA: Thank you. Thank you.

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