

Derek Owusu

in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

GABRIEL GBADAMOSI: Derek Owusu, thank you for coming to speak to us, *WritersMosaic*. To begin, you've published a whole flurry of books in recent years, most recently, *Teaching My Brother to Read*, a book which recounts the process of paying your brother 50 quid a book. And if he reads it and talks about it with you at the end of the month, there's his 50 quid, as a way of giving him a kind of a plank, a way to kind of negotiate his own life. Fantastic idea! You've edited a collection of essays called *SAFE*, on black British men reclaiming 'space'. And by reclaiming 'space', that means reclaiming 'space' on the Tube, you know, in the society, and the culture... accessing themselves. Brilliant! But you also wrote a novel, *That Reminds Me*, about a character called 'K', who's really intriguing. Now, the novel itself won the Desmond Elliot Prize in 2020, so I'm going to focus, if I can, first of all on that.

DEREK OWUSU: Sure.

GG: The character is named 'K', which made me think, 'Oh, this is like a character in a Kafka novel.' Who is he?

DO: Yeah. So, I think when I decided to name him K, I knew people would think that I was trying to, I guess, dig my heels in some sort of Western

literary tradition of naming characters K. The most recent, I believe, being J. M. Coetzee, as well. But that's not what I was trying to do at all because, obviously, the main character is Ghanaian and, obviously, in Ashanti culture, Ghanaians are named... well, they have a second name based on the day of the week that they were born. And with the males, all of the names begin with K except one, which is Yao. I don't like naming characters as well; I feel like as soon as I've given them a name, I've associated things to them that I haven't written about them.

GG: Okay. So, which day is Yao, and which day is the K of the novel?

DO: So, Yao is a Thursday. K is every other day. Kwame, Kwesi, Kwaku, Kwabena, Kwasi and Kojo.

GG: And on what day was *your* K born?

DO: No specific day. [Laughs]

GG: [Laughs]

DO: [Laughs] No specific day, at all.

GG: Just not Thursday.

DO: Just not Thursday. Yeah, exactly.

GG: Okay, so not Thursday's child. There's a quality of this particular character... he is himself marked by a certain strangeness. He notices, for example, about his handwriting. That that's the first difference of ability he has with other people. But the main thing is, he seems to see the

strangeness of other people. It's really quite a strong way to kind of plant, to place your character, in this situation of a stranger to the world he's in. Can you tell us about that?

DO: Yeah, you know I just, kind of ... There's a lot of alienation in the book, but in different circumstances. And, you know, I did want in that passage especially, I can be honest and say, that I did want that to reflect my own way of seeing my writing and so on... But also, although he, you know, he is in a foster home, that he knows to be his home, there's still that element of alienation. Even though he's unaware that he is a black boy in a white middle-class family, there's still something instinctual that happens to people regardless of race, gender, sex, class that you still sometimes feel isolated and alienated. And I feel like that's just a 'human' thing that happens when you're unaware of all of the other characteristics of your, I guess, social identity.

GG: Yeah, so in that sense, I suppose, he's an 'everyman' and 'everywoman'. I was really, kind of, reminded reading this, of the Alex Wheatle film within Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series of films.

DO: Oh, yes.

GG: And, of course, Alex Wheatle was taken into care away from his birth family. And in the film when he comes back from the shires into Brixton, he has to, as it were, *learn* his identity. In fact, he has to *create* his identity as he goes along.

DO: Yes.

GG: And K seemed very much in that situation, in a sense, in the driving seat of being able to assemble himself – a new version of himself.

DO: Yeah, I think the act of remembering is that, because I've... my personal opinion is that memories are us; we are our memories. Without memories, I guess, our entire identity falls away. So, in that... I wrote it in fragments of memories. It is essentially piecing things together and then this is why I also have the illustrations of Anansi the Spider with the web coming together. And by the end of the novel, hopefully, there's a fully formed character in front of you that you can identify with, sympathise with, hate or do whatever with – because that is life. Life is fragments. We don't remember everything because we are our memories. We are, you know, shattered fragments of a life that we wished we could remember everything, but we never can.

GG: Throughout the novel, there are these drawings of a spider, an Anansi motif, which look to me like a kind of device sitting over the novel of well... invocation – African cultural interpretation... a form of prayer. How was that working for you, as you were putting together the jigsaw of the novel?

DO: Yes, I wanted it to be, kind of, like a prayer to Anansi, but it was also just important for me to have folklore in the novel again, you know. I was just kind of reaching into Ralph Ellison's, kind of, rulebook when it comes to fiction, and I just knew that that was something that was important. A lot of people would be able to relate to it, or they'd want to Google it. What is Anansi? Who is Anansi? But then, also at the same time, it's supposed to represent K's, kind of reaching out into a culture that he feels alienated from, which is Ashanti culture, you know. There's moments in the novel where he kind of... I guess wakes up to what he believes to be the live Christianity. And obviously in Christianity, the way to get through God is

through Christ. So, his way, I guess, to speak to God is through Anansi the Spider, the only, kind of, folkloric, or, I guess, demi-god that he is aware of. Anansi is supposed to represent the culture that he's trying to connect with as well.

GG: Let me take you to two moments in the novel: The first is a moment when K is dancing with his Mum. Yeah... and an allied moment, I think, when he goes out into the street away from this Ghanaian gathering and he sees young British-Ghanaian boys on the street; their bodies speaking as loud as their voices. Do you know?

DO: Mmhmm.

GG: And both that thing of the dance and just the physical presence, Ghanaian presence on the London streets; it looked like you were, sort of, putting together in your mind some sort of sense of the embodied qualities of feeling an experience that your tongue can't reach; you can't necessarily put into words. But the body is itself creating a kind of story that you're sensitive to, and you're writing this novel with as well. How is that working?

DO: Yes, absolutely. I really wanted to capture the things that go beyond speech – the kind of myths we live by, you know, the customs that are not one hundred percent Ghanaian, they're not one hundred percent British. You know that there was a fusion, and it becomes black British with, obviously, a Ghanaian, West African tilt. And it was really difficult for me to, kind of, put into words, what I was trying to... what I was feeling that I wanted to try and convey to the reader, especially with the older Ghanaians, who are outside. I wanted that kind of area to be familiar to people who maybe grew up in Broadwater Farm, or in Tottenham, you know, or in Brixton, or, you know, very concentrated areas where there was a lot of...

a lot of Ghanaians. And again, with the dancing with his mother... anybody who's gone to a hall party, you know, a community centre in a working-class area, just to kind of get that whole feeling... So, with those passages that I wrote, it was more about atmosphere that I was trying to create, I guess. So just to come away from me being able to say to you, 'I am Ghanaian, yeah,' they're just things you just, kind of, know. Do you know what I'm trying to say?

GG: Yeah, and 'do' and 'be'?

DO: Yes.

GG: But what you're saying also reminds me of what the African-American scholar from Princeton, Eddie Glaude, says about James Baldwin. He says, 'Well, a moment came, with the collapse of the civil rights movement at the end of the 60s, beginning of the 70s, when Baldwin turned away from trying to be that all-inclusive, 'we' as Americans, and started to speak more specifically to the 'we' of African-Americans - how we keep ourselves floating through the Nixon, Reagan regimes and on through Donald Trump.' And he said, 'Well, Baldwin's language changed. He started, kind of using a street language from African-America, which directly connects to African-Americans, and perhaps outsiders would be slightly deaf to.' Do you think there's a possibility in Britain that we could be starting to generate this kind of internal, kind of, idiolect or dialect; or how would you call it this internal black British way of communicating?

DO: I think so. I think that... I think it's been developing for quite a while, you know. And I think now it's really taking a lot of different influences; whereas before it was mainly, you know, Jamaican patois that was being, kind of, melded with, kind of, Cockney and things like that. Now, there's a

lot of pidgin that's getting into the mix of it as well. Obviously, I'm... I'm like in my thirties, so, I'm not really in the thick of it, as I would have been if I was in secondary school around this time. But I see my brother talking to his friends – my brother's... you know... my brother's eleven years younger than me – talking to his friends, and some of his friends who are like, I guess, like from Antigua, or from St. Vincent, and they're saying things in pidgin. When I was in school that was unimaginable, you know. It wasn't cool to be... to be West African, but now it's everybody wants to be a part of it. Do you know what I mean?

GG: Let me bring you back to the novel, *That Reminds Me*. At a certain moment, I was really intrigued by this; the novel moves into what I described as a theatre, a theatre of acts: acts one, two, three, and four.

DO: Yeah.

GG: And these are during the episodes of, kind of, street violence, eruption of riot, of crime, the kind of scenario that we've all lived through. And, certainly, you have in the Broadwater Farm estate.

DO: Yeah.

GG: Was that a pressure you felt needed to be opened up by a transformation of the novel, of the literary form... like the novel's not going to be able to contain it?

DO: Yeah, and I also wanted to: one, distance myself from it, make it very, very clear. Because, obviously, there's parts of this that are autobiographical, I just want to make it clear that I *wasn't* there, you know. I wasn't in the thick of it. But, also, just kind of, you know, a little bit

forcefully, put across my opinion on the way that a lot of the 'political left' saw the events, you know, the way they romanticise afterwards [as](#) if to say, 'This is the beginnings of a revolution that's about to come.' And in my mind, I just thought to myself, 'It started off as one thing, and then it completely turned into a farce.' It was, it wasn't what we thought it was going to be. Obviously, it's complicated. People are frustrated when you're, you know... the social economic lives of people in the inner city, it obviously does build up. The frustrations do build up. And that's important to acknowledge. But it's also important for us to acknowledge that, when I watched back the footage, when it first happened, you know, as the papers lay a claim that it was like, you know, young black youths, working-class youths who are out here causing mischief. No, not at all. There was a lot of people driving up from like Southgate, driving up and trying to buy the equipment... that's just... the things that had just been stolen. So, everybody was in on it, you know. And so, it just became, it became so ridiculous, that I felt like I needed to say that this is just, kind of, like a play, with the exaggerated acting that happens, of course, on the stage.

GG: Let me take what you say about, for example, Driller Rap, which is in the same kind of area of the book. In a way you drill down into your opponent, and you taunt your opponent. That's what this is - when you're divided into 'ends' and against each other, and against... Even though it's...we are the same people, we're somehow kind of getting at each other. People look at this as really antisocial, the real, kind of, the back end of anything kind of positive. But nevertheless, you describe it as potentially an outlet for young black life put under great pressure, but you use a particular word as well. You say it's a kind of form of 'possession' – like, my own life, can't come to terms, can't articulate, can't deal with this reality. So, I need another spirit to inhabit me, perhaps a collective spirit and a violent spirit. And that is a spirit of possession. What's your feeling? What's

your view of possession? Because that's a very big thing in West African culture that you get 'ridden by the spirit'.

DO: Yeah, see, I wouldn't say a spirit of violence. So, I grew up in the grime era, which is very, very similar to drill. And, yeah, like I say, it was an expression. It was... it was an outlet. It was a way of building a community, building a culture. There was a hierarchy in there, you know. Everybody knew everybody, you know... It was... it was exciting. It was mysterious. It was a great... it was a great thing, being part of a subculture developing without actually knowing what it is. Because you were just not conscious of it, you just enjoyed it. And, absolutely, when you go to like radio stations, and there'll be emcees, you know, on the mic, and there'll be... you know, emceeing against each other, the mood would completely change; the world outside didn't exist it... it felt like they, like they were possessed, everybody was excited, you'd be getting goosebumps all... all over your body. It was just this palpable excitement in the air, do you know what I mean? And then then you'd have to leave and go back to the council estate, or wherever it is you was going and it was completely different. So, we were all excited by that. We were all sitting by our radios listening to Heat FM, waiting for the next MC to get on to the mic, or they were waiting outside the studio waiting to get in and create a new dub that they could send over MSN. Well, it did feel kind of spiritual at the time, you know. When I think back to it was just such an amazing time. And that's not for me to glorify anything else that was happening on the streets, you know. I wasn't on the street like that. And I know there was a lot of tension, and there was a lot of violence and stuff. But it wasn't because of the music, the music was just, kind of, reflecting what was already happening.

GG: And let me move you on to the book, the collection of essays that you've edited: *SAFE*, on [Black British Men Reclaiming Space](#). In the course

of an essay that you also contribute to this extraordinary and diverse collection of voices talking about that need to make space for black British masculinity; you describe vulnerability as a way to soften and perhaps reshape ourselves; be able to access ourselves – the other side of a toxic masculinity, toxic racism, toxic patriarchy. So, do you see, as it were, the crisis – and there is an extended crisis in my experience – in black Britain, with mental health and with self-image? Do you see that crisis as being just a stage towards our ability to reshape and recreate ourselves?

DO: One thing that needs to happen as well is that we need to be able to have honest conversations with each other. So, the vulnerability comes in when we open up to each other. I mean, the ideal situation would be that we're able to speak to our parents about things that have happened in our life, and the way we've been brought up and have, you know, the way they've been brought up, and what they've gone through. As any person who's tried to have a conversation with their West African parent will tell you, that it's very difficult to get them to open up about their past. Because they feel like they've been through this, so we don't have to. Why are they going to burden us with their hardships? You know, 'That's, that's not the point of why I came here and why I tried to raise you in this society.' So, we need to all just be able to talk to each other and just be vulnerable and not feel like, we're letting out family business by saying that I've had this, kind of, mental health struggle, or I've had this, kind of, struggle, this has happened, you know. Healing comes about, through all of us – a collective healing can take place. Do you know what I mean?

GG: Yeah, there's got to be some washing of dirty laundry.

DO: There has to be.

GG: There's got to be intergenerational exchange... There's got to be.

DO: One hundred percent! I think that... that definitely... it needs to happen. But it's really hard to reach people, you know, especially with social media as well; the language becomes alienating, you know. If, for example, if I put on a talk that said, 'Dismantling masculine... black masculinity,' and it's for men, and I'm like, 'Guys, come!', the majority of the people who would turn up to that event are going to be women. Because black men will see the word 'masculinity', and they'll associate it with how it's put online and put on Twitter and Instagram, and they're going to recoil from it, and think, 'Oh, I don't want anything to do...' But if the title was something like, I know, I don't know, 'Rebuilding your mental health to make the most of your money-making capacities,' or something like that, they're more likely to turn up.

GG: [Laughs] Why not? Me, I'd come, too. [Laughs]

DO: Yeah, exactly!

GG: Let me take you back to Black Lives Matter. I hear analysis of Black Lives Matter that actually, you know, it's not about 'blackness'. The problem is 'whiteness', and 'blackness' isn't the problem. 'Blackness' is only created by there being this hateful ideology rooted in some very morally ugly things about actually it's better to be white, and *our* lives matter more than *yours*. And so actually, dismantling 'whiteness' is akin to what feminists had to do in dismantling patriarchy and the errors of patriarchy – that you own your wife, you own the labour of your children. I mean, all of those Old Testament mistakes that they make.

DO: Yeah.

GG: So, when it comes to that kind of image of well, it's about 'whiteness', not about 'blackness'; and 'blackness' is a by-product in the sense of 'whiteness'. As James Baldwin would say, 'I'm not the nigger, baby. It's you, it ain't me.' There are two kinds of difficulties: One, lots of people want to stand up to be 'black and to be proud' and to own it, and won't, kind of, necessarily accept that it's tactical, it's a strategic identity to try and kind of whittle away and remove the residue of colonialism and exploitation and the privilege of 'whiteness'. But, on the other hand, there is this kind of question about well, really, what we should be thinking about is the nature of 'whiteness', in our society, 'whiteness' in our history and culture. Where do you, kind of, feel in moving your way between those things?

DO: I think, yeah, we need to definitely try and understand 'whiteness', its function in society. Things like racism... racism, was, I guess, you know, taking it back... racism was created because the Europeans wanted to enslave. They didn't enslave because they were racist, do you know what I mean?

GG: Yeah.

DO: So, yeah, we have to wonder what is that function now? Why do they still need to uphold that? Why do they still need to exist? What kind of control does it still guarantee them... this idea of 'whiteness'? So, I... I one hundred percent agree! But, then, I also do think, you know, I completely understand that a lot of people think that. I mean, and, obviously, this comes down to like black pessimism that you know, embracing, being black means that you are embracing something that is essentially... was foisted upon us by racists. And what we need to really do is reject that. I completely

understand that thinking but, again, reacting to the world as it is not as we want it to be. By embracing that we can come together, we can learn.

GG: Yeah.

DO: By embracing 'blackness' you can come together and then try and overcome 'whiteness'. Do you know what I mean? Because once... the thing is... once 'whiteness' has been destroyed, once that... once it's been overcome, and whatever, then 'blackness' will probably cease to exist. For the majority of people, I believe, for a lot of people, it won't. But again, as you say, 'blackness' is created in opposition to 'whiteness'. So yeah, it's hard to say where any of this is going to go, because there's been so many points in history where you've just really, really saw, you know, the... the sun on the horizon, and then something changes, and there's a new challenge that needs to be won over by, you know, posterity, and then their, you know, their children have their own issues that they have to battle. It's almost like this is a cycle, that's... that's never going to end.

GG: One of the things that kind of strikes, struck me very much reading *SAFE*, a whole host of black men writing about the experience of being black in Britain was, if I could describe it, as the diversity of diversity. When I was growing up and, of course, my dad's Yoruba from Nigeria, but to be black in London, man, you had to try a bit of Jamaican patois to, kind of, get into the blues party, you know. You had to, kind of, fit in, and all the small islanders did, too. So, I don't just pull the pity down on me. It was a Jamaican... it was certainly an Afro-Caribbean thing. And then a certain moment came when the African and, particularly, the West African presence, really built up on our streets. And there was some half attempt to say, 'Oh, these are very different communities', or 'They're all black. Can't tell them apart.' But you know, they're really different communities.

And now there's a whole new wave of people from East Africa, from the Middle East, and so on, who have come onto our streets. So, actually, when we look at 'blackness', we're no longer looking at the 'blackness' created by 'whiteness', aren't we looking at a much more interesting and varied phenomenon that's growing in which our culture is part pidgin, part patois, part Arabic, part English?

DO: Yeah, no, I absolutely agree. I absolutely agree. And this is why I'm... I'm willing to wrestle with a lot of writers for this title 'black British', when it comes to literature, you know. I'm really trying to collect my thoughts and... and come up with what I truly believe to be that that definition. But yeah, I absolutely agree with it.

GG: But it's certainly one of the things that distinguishes us from African-American experience, which you describe as complex and complicated, as both an experience and a way of a language to speak of that experience. That must be a very, very different trajectory that we're having here as black British writers, black British people.

DO: Absolutely, you know, absolutely. Because we have to grapple with, you know, post colonialism, you know; we have to grapple with colonialism, the legacies of imperialism and those kinds of things. Though of course, imperialism, and colonialism have affected the African-American experience, but in different ways, and we're having to grapple with that. And that's how that's affected us; how that's forced us to migrate here, or be brought here, or decide to assimilate here, or our concept of 'whiteness' and things like that. We've been intermingling completely and cultures, you know, becoming mixed up and things like that. I mean, and I think that's a good thing. I think that's a beautiful thing. I don't think there's anything negative about that. It just means that it then becomes harder for us to

write about our identities. It becomes harder for us to develop race theory in the UK; one, because we haven't had as long as the United States as well, we haven't been writing about our unique black British identities for as long as African-Americans have been writing about being African-American. So, we've of course, we've still got a way to go. Our sensibilities are completely different, you know. So, there's... there's, there's a lot of things. So, we, I mean, in terms of, kind of like race theory and things like that, it can be... a lot of things can be applied here, but we're behind when it comes to the specifics of what it's like to be a black British person in the UK.

GG: I got it. Let me finally move you on. And *That reminds me*, your novel, was the first, I think, the first novel to come out of Stormzy's Murky Books imprint...

DO: Yes, yep.

GG: ... that he's doing with Penguin. So, you're, in a sense, at the forefront, vanguard of a new, kind of, literary presence. You've also with colleagues set up a podcast, Mostly Lit. And I actually attended once, one of your live events, live recordings...

DO: Oh, God. Why?

GG: ... and I thought, 'What an interesting... what an interesting format,' I thought.

DO: [Laughs]

GG: Can you tell us, just to finish up... why you set up Mostly Lit, and what your ambitions are for it?

DO: Yeah, so... so Mostly Lit started... I think it started in 2006 ... 2016. I wasn't initially part of it, but I was reading a whole lot. And I was just dumping all of my thoughts on Twitter. And one of the hosts came across me and we had an argument, I believe, about *Animal Farm*. And he said, 'Come on the podcast and argue with me about this.' And I was like, I just said to him, 'Look, I don't want to argue with you about *Animal Farm* in some literary way. I don't like doing that. I'd like to... just like to speak casually.' Like, you're not trying to get into the specifics and the literary devices and the politics and all that kind of thing. He's like, 'No, no, it's fine. That's what we want to do. So come on.' So, I came on, we spoke about a few things and then I went on another episode. Eventually, they said, 'Come and join us and be part of it as a whole.' So, I did that for about, I think, two or three years. I left them... The podcast is still going. There's still episodes up, but I left the podcast, I believe, in 2018, just before *SAFE* came out. But what I'm hoping to do now... I miss it so much. I missed just talking absolute shite about books. I miss it so much that I'm trying to set up another podcast... [Laughs]

GG: [Laughs]

DO: ... you know, where I can just do that because it's one thing writing kind of like essays and writing things about literature, but it's another thing just chopping it up with a friend, you know, not having to worry about putting on any, kind of, literary airs and just talking about literature the way I might talk about a new album, or something. So yeah, I'm trying to set up another podcast where we can just talk about books and especially talk about books I consider, or that are happy to be called, black British. I really

want so many books out there that, you know, they just need to be recognised. I think it's great what Bernardine Evaristo is doing at the moment where she's getting Penguin to republish particular books that she felt like should have had a lot more limelight when they first came out. I think that's amazing that she's doing that.

GG: Okay with that, podcasts, and books flying past diaries, Derek Owusu, thanks. Thanks for talking to *WritersMosaic*.

DO: Thank you.

A recording of this interview can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Derek Owusu and Gabriel Gbadamosi