WRITERS MOSAIC

Raymond Antrobus

In Conversation with Colin Grant

> ‘I sometimes imagine an all-hearing God, a white cloud with one tiny ear and one giant ear, neither needing help from hearing aids, neither ear missing any sound, and this all-hearing God heard enough of the world and decided to destroy the all-hearing world in a great flood.’
>
> — Raymond Antrobus

[Music]

Colin Grant (CG): This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*, with me, Colin Grant. At the Edinburgh Festival in 2025, I was talking with the poet, Raymond Antrobus, about his memoir, *The Quiet Ear*.

[Music and applause]

CG: Here we are again. Hello, hello, hello. Some of you may remember I was here a couple of hours ago. I'm Colin Grant. I'm still Colin Grant. And I'm really delighted to be welcoming onto the stage a poet and friend and, I suppose, conflict of interest in that Raymond has taken to calling me Uncle Colin, which is quite sweet. I really like it, actually. But I think Raymond has been part of our family anyway for a number of years. We've done live events in Brighton, where we live. I've always thought of Raymond as kind of a son, so I'm so pleased to be with you on stage, Raymond. So Raymond, as you all know, I hope, is a writer, broadcaster, and perhaps best known for his Ted Hughes prize for *The Perseverance,* his collection, *The Perseverance*. Today, we're going to be talking about a memoir. We can discuss whether it's a straight memoir or whether it's a hybrid memoir, called *The Quiet Ear: An Investigation of Missing Sound*. So I often like to start with a quote. I'm going to quote, Raymond, what the reviewer said in *The Observer*: 'A searing memoir, *The Quiet Ear* is dark and often heart-rending. But it is a testament to Antrobus's creativity and mirrors his poetry, which he acknowledges "held and honoured many of my own burdens and truths"' I wrote that. Okay. [Audience laughs] Thought I might have a bit of a bigger reaction. [Applause] So obviously, I wrote the review, Raymond wrote the book, which requires the bigger reaction. So Raymond, I know from talking to you over the years that this

book has been a long road for you. Can you talk about the journey? When the seed for the idea of the memoir began, what was the idea behind that?

Raymond Antrobus (RA): First off, hello, hi. Thanks to everyone for coming. I really internalised this idea that what W. H. Auden said about poets never writing memoirs, poets should never write memoirs. That was some advice he'd given to, yeah, to poets. And he didn't really explain why. But my interpretation of that, coming from someone like Auden, was that you're forfeiting your mystique. Poetry relies on a kind of flexible truth, and therefore the memoir, which is this idea of a stable truth, a singular truth, is the antithesis of poetry. So I knew that if I were to write in a memoir thing—the memoir was never on my radar. What I was trying to do was to write, like you said, a hybrid book that was part essay, part poetry, part testament, I suppose, in a way. But I wanted to write about education, and I wanted to write about the emotional journey of being educated in all these different schools: in a mainstream school, in a special educational needs unit, and in a deaf school. And it wasn't until I was teaching that I realised how unique my experience of being a British educated person was because so few students that I had could relate to all these different styles of education. So I was like, *I need to write this for myself even to understand it*. So while I was writing it, it ended up being this really emotional thing that I was doing—I did a lot of therapy for. And my therapist ended up saying that I had PTSD [laughs]. So I was like, *oh, I thought that was*

just for war veterans. But turns out, I had that, and I'm getting that treated. It's still an ongoing thing of getting that treated. And that came out of writing this.

CG: And what's the relationship between writing and treatment for PTSD?

RA: Well, this is the thing, my education—I went to Goldsmiths, with—there was a poet there called Dean Atta, who also went to Goldsmiths.

CG: Dean. Shoutout to Dean. Yes, man. Dean is in the house.

RA: I did this thing called a Spoken Word MA at Goldsmiths, but much of that was about—it was really an art therapy master's looking at not only how learning happens and what the logistics and the science of learning is, but it was also about what creativity does in a classroom, what humour does in a classroom, what emotion can play in a classroom setting, in a learning environment. So I went quite deep on the study of something called emotional literacy, which is just the skill of being able to articulate your emotions, to put it as straightforward as I can. And then so you've got that one level of being able to articulate how you're feeling, but then to do something creative with that knowledge, with that feeling, to create metaphor, figurative language,

and then you're then on another level of being praised, not just for your emotional articulation but also your craft, your skill, of performance with language.

CG: So you mentioned essay there, I would say your book is essayistic in its approach. And we're not going to go through the chronology; we're going to chop around with order here. What I'd like to do early on is to give the audience a flavour of the writing, which I think is very, very strong, powerful, and poignant writing. And there's a moment in the book when you're at a school, and a boy asks you what's the benefit of being deaf.

RA: Okay, I'll read that section.

[RA reads from *The Quiet Ear*]

> 'What's Good about Being Deaf?
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> I met Thomas when I was visiting a school in Durham in 2017. His teachers whisked me away after I delivered an assembly on poetry to a packed hall of eleven- to sixteen-year-olds, to sit me in a room with him, a hazel-haired round headed eleven-year-old boy who had two large silver hearing aids in his ears. He kept his head down on the table as his

teachers helicoptered over him. Thomas was the only deaf student in the school and the overzealous hearing teachers gathered Thomas and me in a quiet room to meet each other.

'So, Thomas,' said one of the teachers, kneeling beside him. 'This is a poet, he wears hearing aids like you.' Another teacher butted in. 'Yes, what do you have to say about being deaf, Thomas?'

None of the teachers knew sign; even the fact that sometimes they spoke without facing him showed me that Thomas wasn't in a room that was accommodating his needs. Thomas kept his head down and finally said, 'It's useless.'

I told Thomas that I felt useless at his age too, that I had internalised this idea that my deafness decreased my value and limited my future (employment and romantic). I explained that I'd spend decades pushing against this notion. Deafness is harder when you have to rely on people who aren't deaf to understand you, people who don't have the patience to face you when they talk or speak sign, or know when to pause in conversations when there's a loud noise like an alarm going off or a truck

bustling down the street. One of the teachers, perhaps feeling accused and that my words were negative, interrupted again. 'Yes, but look at him, Thomas, he's now a famous poet.' Thomas lifted his head from the table, stared at me, thinking, then asked, 'Are poets useful?'

'Well,' I said, 'that's a good question, and intelligent people ask good questions.' Thomas fidgeted with his thumbs. 'I think there is a power in finding ways to articulate your unique self in the world, a useful power.'

Poetry helped me, even if it was just a way to temporarily lift or lighten the narrative of the world, even if it didn't always transform my truths and traumas. At times it stopped me spiralling into the story of being that boy who stood low along the rank of the other boys who I thought were more clever, more beautiful, more rich, more worthy. I was a boy who wanted to blend in. Blending in looked easier, calmer. I was a boy who didn't want to look like the enemy of any system, even a system that hated me, and I know I succeeded despite the system.

I thought of Thomas when I began doing readings of my first picture book, *Can Bears Ski?*, a story based on my own experience growing up

deaf with hearing parents who struggled to guide me through the hearing world. Part of the purpose of the story is to show deafness as an experience rather than a trauma. During those first readings I got a range of questions from deaf young readers. Some engaged with the story, asking, 'Why does the moon have a face?' and 'Can the bears sign?' And there were young readers looking at the other faces in the Zoom call and asking, 'How many people here have cochlear implants?' Another question was, 'Does anyone here have red hearing aids?' But a common question I received was, 'What's good about being deaf?' There is an innocence to this question, but there's also a self-consciousness, one that some would say ought to not exist for children so young. But, alas, from birth we're lucky to be born in a room that isn't ablelist, let alone a world.

Forgive me, I'm not trying to be grandiose; I didn't mean for poetry to give me a platform for sweeping statements of self-affirmation. For a long time, my poetry was private, it helped me hide. I hid behind poetic thought, in part because it was an intellectual activity that asserted my potential usefulness. In reality, I had no idea what a deaf racially ambiguous boy could offer the 'real' world.'

[Applause]

CG: Now, I'm going to show perhaps my inability to pay attention. There's a line that I wrote down, which is in the book, which you liken deafness as to poetry. 'Deafness has given me an art, a history, a culture and a tradition to live through.' Did you just say that in that reading?

RA: Maybe. Yeah.

CG: Well, it bears reinforcing because in a way, you could almost substitute the word deafness for Black, couldn't you?

RA: Yeah, there's a lot of intersection, intersectional things in the book. It was really important for me that I'm not—it's not a polemic. I'm not trying to make a point about what that is. One of the things that I feel I had to surrender to in writing this book is it doesn't matter whether or not I say anything or not about Blackness; that's going to get read into it by nature of who I am. So, yeah.

CG: But Penny says—Penny, the early [years] teacher says that it's doubly difficult or triply difficult for a Black deaf boy that it would be for a non-Black deaf boy. As you say, it's intersectional. So that people understand what it is that you've had to contend with, can you talk through the first seven years of your life, where you had your first hearing test when you were born, which you passed, and then you write that for the next few years, you lived in your own kind of noise? Can you explain what that kind of noise is?

RA: Well, because I didn't have anything else to compare what it was, the assumption was I was hearing. And I have a strange deafness. It's like a high frequency deafness, so there's all these sounds that I don't hear, so bits of words just disappear. So 'sh', 'b, 's', all these—so within a word. So one of the examples I give is the word, what was it, 'spacious' and how often I mishear that word. And another word is 'talisman'. Talisman. So I've had all of this quite intense speech therapy to be able to make the shape with my mouth even though I don't hear that sound. And yeah.

CG: That's quite a feat.

RA: It is. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. [Audience laughs] But the book also talks about that as a—in some ways, the root of oppression for D/deaf people is being forced to speak. And that comes from—there's a thing called

oralism, when people—I mean, I'm in Edinburgh; this is the birth place of oralism. Graham Alexander Bell put his millions of pounds into that. It's a 300 year history of oralism. And yeah. People know this story, right? I'm not giving you anything new. Yes, so I don't need to talk about the telephone and Graham Alexander Bell.

CG: But telephones are important in your life, aren't they, because there's a moment where you point out that for many years, your parents didn't know you were deaf? What was the turning point?

RA: Yeah, it was the telephone. And there's an irony there. Yeah, my mum bought this large telephone, which everyone in the house could hear except for me. If I wasn't in the room, I didn't hear it. And so at first, people, my mum, my dad, everyone, just thought I was being rude and ignoring it. 'Oh, you don't want to pick up the phone.' And then eventually my mum was like, 'I don't think he's actually hearing it. I think we need to test his hearing.' So that was the hearing test I failed, this telephone. And then quickly after going to an actual audiologist—so I'm born in 1986; it wasn't until 1987 that the NHS started giving proper hearing tests. So my hearing test was this: [clicks fingers]. They just click next to your ears [laughs], and it's about whether this newborn moves his head or not—his or her head. And so yeah. But then when I had an actual test where they could pick up nuance of deafness—because that's something I'm really

also hoping the book is going to do, really help us have a more nuanced understanding of what deafness is because I've had to constantly fight, in some ways, or oppose the idea that I'm someone whose not deaf enough or I'm not how a deaf person should be, the disposition. So I just read about all these different deaf figures throughout history, throughout the last 300 years, from Goya to—I mean, there's a lot of people that I've read about that I didn't mention in the book, like Jack Ashley was the first Labour deaf—deaf MP period, but did some amazing campaign work for disability rights, disability justice in the UK. His story didn't quite fit. But I mean, a lot of—you know what this is. When you research for a book and so much of it—some of the best writing I've ever done didn't make it into this book. It just didn't fit.

CG: Well, I hope you stored it for another book.

RA: Maybe. Maybe. Yeah.

CG: I wonder what framework you had when constructing the book. When I was reading the book, I was thinking—I was looking for a way to read it. And I often fasten upon Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the psychologist, who talks about the stages of grief when you have a diagnosis that is not going to turn out well for you. There's anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And initially, there's a lot of anger, isn't there,

on your part. What was—how was that manifested and how was that dealt with by the people who were teaching you?

RA: Oh, this is why I had to write the book because it's just—that's a huge question. But I have written about—there's a chapter called 'Deaf Anger', and I've spent a long time in therapy. My first therapy was anger management. I had a lot of anger issues.

CG: So much so that you'd go along to your therapist and wouldn't put your hearing aids in.

RA: Yeah. Yeah. Pretty much. Yeah, I'd just sit there and take them out and just—but there are still certain things that she gave me that I still to this day have internalised and that are still part of my practise.

CG: What are they? Give some examples.

RA: Just visualisation is a big one for me, and just breathing. Breathing and counting. It's like, *okay, I'm feeling dysregulated. I need to remove myself from the situation and just 10 seconds of breathing*. Otherwise, [laughs] I'm in trouble, really. But then you asked about, I guess, some of the racial elements of the book. I—it's a different thing, I think,

when, yeah, in the, I guess, in the Black body, being angry, you put yourself in danger in that way when you show it. And I saw that from my dad.

CG: Yeah, your dad, Seymour. So Seymour has a lot of trouble accepting your deafness, doesn't he? 'But the boy hears me,' he says. And there's a line that a lot of reviewers have picked up on about when your dad sees you as Black versus sees you as White. So when he's drunk, you're a White boy; when he's sober, you're Black. How have you reconciled yourself to that, whether your father perceived you or spoke of you.

RA: I mean, that's his trauma. That's his projection. That's not me. So it's taken me a while to dislodge his projection, his narrative, and not make it about me. And that's taken a lot of work.

CG: Yeah. Did you discern that when he was saying that or were you too young to work out?

RA: I was too young. Because he did it a lot. He did it a lot. So it just meant that I never understood who I was looking at when I looked at myself in the mirror. And I remember a therapist saying—talking about how important it is to look at the mirror and say, 'I am me. I love myself.' And I was like, 'Honestly though, I look in the mirror,

and I don't understand what I see. I don't look how I think I'm meant to look.' So there was all kinds of strange dysmorphia.

CG: How did you think you were meant to look?

RA: How did I think I was meant to look? So the people that my dad—my dad tried to become a Rastaman. He failed because you're meant to—there are rules that you're meant to. I mean, he smoke, he drank, he ate meat. You're not meant to do any of that.

CG: Yeah. Three strikes.

RA: Three strikes, you're out. But he would put pictures on the wall. He had a picture of Marcus Garvey on the wall, of Marcus Garvey looking 'very dignified as a Black man, gentleman. Don't be looking at him and point. You know him? Marcus Garvey. A real man. A Black man.' And then you had Bob Marley. And then there was a weird thing with Bob Marley because he would also be like, 'Him father White, you know. Him a half [inaudible]. Him mixed like you. Bob Marley.' And I'm like, 'Oh, weird, okay.' 'But him have dreads.' The whole dreadlock thing. But then to my dad I'd be like, 'Oh, dad, I can't grow dreads.' And he'd be like, 'I'll get you some shoe polish. Some shoe polish and mush up your hair.' I never went that deep with the shoe polish. I did do the, at one

point, I did do cornrows, and I had it in for a week, and everyone called me Shaun Paul. I became 'Sean Paul. Sean the Paul.'

CG: So a little fun fact here, Raymond: when Bob Marley was stepping out for the first time with Rita, he grew up, as you know, in the ghetto in Trench Town, where the ghetto was mostly for Black people. He was a fair skinned brown boy. So he wanted to make himself blacker than he was. So he would get Rita to put shoe polish in his hair to make it coarser and rougher, so he would be accepted as a Black person.

RA: Exactly. Yeah, yeah. That's what my dad said I should do, find a Rita.

CG: Yeah, yeah. But in a way, what you're also describing in the book is the way that you are anxious, as a lot of young people are, adolescents are, about being observed, about being visible. And there's a very poignant phrase in the book which spells this out, about whether you're being taken in and out of schools regularly like a machine that had to be taken out of the main factory for specialised maintenance.

RA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, because the—yeah, you feel that. In the classroom, it's like, 'Sorry, you've got to stop the lesson now because that boy over there needs to go into the other room.'

CG: Yeah, that's a long walk.

RA: That's a long walk. [Laughs] And it's quiet.

CG: Sorry, bringing back memories for you. And is that the reason why you took to growing your hair long and wearing hoods?

RA: Yeah, well in part, but that was more to do with my hearing aids. That was more to do with me not—

CG: You didn't want to be wearing or seen wearing?

RA: I hid it.

CG: Yeah. Was that effective?

RA: No, because I was part of a deaf school. [CG laughs] I was in a deaf school and a hearing school, and so it was a whole thing where I had to like, in the deaf school, *oh, okay, I can show them. Oh, now I got to go into the hearing school, hood goes back up*. So

my sign name in the deaf world was 'R' Cap, which is 'R'— because I always wore a hood hat. But later on, when I stopped wearing hoods and actually kept my hair at a reasonable length, my sign name became this: 'R' sunshine, ray, sunshine. Me not care no more. This is who I am, kind of thing. When I went back to Blanche Nevile, which was the deaf school that I went to, and my English teacher was still there, and the first thing—and she hadn't seen me in 14 years, and the first thing she said to me was, 'Oh, you've accepted your deaf identify.' And I was like, 'Wow, you remembered that?' And she was like, 'Oh, yes, you were so tormented by it.' And so, yeah, it was emotional.

CG: You wrestle also with the way that some people will turn that around, they don't say they have hearing loss, they say they have 'Deaf gain'. Can you explore or expand on that?

RA: So yeah, that was a term coined by Aaron Williamson, a deaf amazing performance artist, who came up with the term in 2005, in which, yes, he gets diagnosed as deaf, but he's irked every time he hears the audiologist use the term 'hearing loss'. He's like, why hearing loss? I feel like I've gained something. Let's flip this into [Deaf] gain. Which you can give or take. I've become less dogmatic about that because the word hearing loss is so in the culture, I'm just tired of fighting against it. I'm like, *okay, fine, whatever.* So in the book, I get to really write on the mode, in that mode, of [Deaf] gain, but not without

showing what the ark is, what kind of language, that kind of thinking, can do to your self esteem. Because every time I heard it, I was like, woah, *I am less, I have lost something*. But then I was like, *but I'm born—what have I lost if I'm born with the hearing I have?* You know?

CG: I do. You also talk about the fact that you're realist and you think that actually people who say that there's compensatory senses, [it's] not necessarily true that you're not somehow given some superpower by being deaf, but you do say you wonder what your son may lose by not being deaf.

RA: Yeah. Yeah. My reading of the world is very much read, yeah, through the prism of a deaf person, or however you want to frame that, deaf person, hard of hearing person. So yeah. And my son is almost—he's four, and he's got speech, and he's got a little bit of sign, and he's walking. I was slow to all these things. So by the time I was four, I barely had any speech still, and everyone was really worried about me. And so what got put on me was 'Oh, he's', at one point, it was 'selective mute'. And at another point, it was 'dyslexic with profound learning difficulties'. So there was all this pathology that was put on me right up until being six with the phone incident. And then suddenly it was like, oh, it's this thing, and it just reframed everything about my trajectory. So what the book then becomes is a homage, an ode, to Teachers of the Deaf. They are

the people who really gave me language and confidence and the ability to speak. Because again, I cannot stress how much attention I got from my speech therapist and my Teachers of the Deaf, staying with me after school, doing all of the movements with the mouth, doing—on time that they weren't always paid for. I feel like becoming a writer, becoming a poet, is—so much of it is an overcompensation for that. I don't want to let them down.

CG: No, well you do honour those Teachers in the book. Hats off to you for doing that. I take issue, was it Auden you said about forfeiting mystique?

RA: Yeah.

CG: Because we both have Jamaican blood coursing through our veins, and Jamaicans would tell you there are no facts, only versions. And so actually, there is a lot of mystique when you write a memoir because of the version.

RA: Totally.

CG: I'm wondering how your friends and relations have taken to including them in your lovely memoir.

RA: Oh, you know. This is the thing, when I heard Colin was going to interview me, I was like, *alright, cool*. That's a Colin question. No, I loved that. Yeah, that was difficult. [Laughs] That was difficult.

CG: Why was it difficult? What—talk us through.

RA: Because when—anyone who's written a memoir—or a person—because it's not just you; it's about the family. But yeah, giving the manuscript to my mum, to my sister.

CG: Corrina.

RA: Yeah, who—my sister, Corrina—they both thanked you for actually naming them.

CG: Yeah, well, you name them in the book.

RA: I do name them in the book. 'We're not just side characters; we're people.' All of that stuff. That's tricky.

CG: It's tricky. Because I was wondering—because for a long time, I didn't see the name Corrina. And I wrote it 'his sister.' And then it pops up just once. So I was like, *okay, he's cool with that. Let's just add Corrina*.

RA: Yeah. I mean, look, I got their names on me. My sister, Corrina. My mother's name, Rosemary. My dad's name, Seymour. So I carry them. They are in my body. But yeah, it was difficult.

CG: Have they read the book?

RA: They have read the book. I made sure they read the book before it was published.

CG: Right. And did they say, 'Don't publish this damn thing'?

RA: They were like, 'If you must.'

CG: Oh, right. Okay.

RA: [Laughs] It's like, yeah. But my mum actually gave me—we had some great—a couple of really interesting conversations that we wouldn't have had without that experience. And yeah, no—

CG: It's a good prompt for difficult conversations.

RA: Yeah, yeah. But no, yeah, someone that actually gave me a lot of comfort in that was talking to your daughter, Jazz, about what it was like to be written about. Because in your memoir—

CG: Oh. Uh-oh.

[Audience laughs]

RA: Here's the mirror.

CG: Turning the tables. Woah.

RA: Turn the tables. In your memoir—so I had a whole conversation with her about that, and I was like, *oh that's fascinating. That's fascinating.* And then—but no—but in a

really—in a way that was around this idea of, yeah, you have to accept people's truth, even if it's like, *okay, I was there, and I have a slight different reading of that experience of that memory, but I'm not disturbed by—I understand where you're coming from with that*. And I thought that was such an interesting, generous way to talk about it.

CG: Well, one of the things I think you do really, really well, and this is a trap sometimes for memoir, is a lot of people want to make themselves the hero of the story; you don't do that. You show your foibles, you show your feet of clay, you show your difficult side, and that makes for a much more full, textured, honest account, which people are looking for. They don't want any sanitised hero with a cape, and you don't give them that. One of the things that really intrigued me was you coming to be a poet. You talk about the influence of Tupac, Busta Rhymes, and going to poetry slams, but you also mention this guy called Leonard Cohen, whose influence is difficult to fess up to. Why would that be difficult to alert your friends to that you are influenced by Leonard Cohen?

RA: At the time, being from Hackney and being—trying to be a bad boy, whatever, a bad man, all of that stuff, I couldn't be like, 'Yo, listen. Hear this Leonard Cohen guy. Come, everyone. [CG laughs] Listen to this. This is a real one. This is my boy. [RA sings] I lit a thin green candle to make you jealous of me. Ah, lyrics, bruv.' No, no, no, no. That

was a deep secret, secrecy right there. Leonard Cohen, and other—Dylan and Patti Smith, I don't know, all of those.

CG: But to include that little anecdote, you've been very revelatory that this is something that most people will be unaware about the negotiations you have to make in yourself to become a poet yourself in this landscape where your friends aren't poets.

RA: Yeah, exactly. And I think it's interesting because it was a thing where it's like, oh, Leonard Cohen, White. So I have to—hmm, that's not going to get me any—there's no culture capital for me there. Not just White but also sombre.

CG: Soft.

RA: Soft! But then, I suppose, my dad was like, 'Yeah.' My dad wasn't anti him at all. He was just like, 'I prefer Dylan.' Because he said Dylan comes—he said that he sounded more like an old Black man. Dylan had an old Black man's soul, is how my dad read someone like Dylan but not Cohen.

CG: Well, a friend of ours came across you today and thought you should be older than you are because of the depth and the wealth of knowledge and the intelligence and

the emotional intelligence of your writing. So I think she's very perceptive in that regard.

RA: I don't mind reading one little bit.

CG: Yeah, about the roll call of names when you're imagining an all hearing God.

RA: Yeah, so this is a roll call of many of the people that the ark—are people familiar with the Genesis. Shout out the Genesis crew.

CG: Yo.

RA: I'm also the grandson of preachers, and I had read Genesis fairly recently, not ark. So I wrote this as a way to give homage to many of the people who helped me develop in the hearing world.

[RA reads from *The Quiet Ear*]

> 'I sometimes imagine an all-hearing God, a white cloud with one tiny ear and one giant ear, neither needing help from hearing aids, neither ear missing any sound, and this all-hearing God heard enough of the world

and decided to destroy the all-hearing world in a great flood, and we mere mortals needed passage to the Deaf world, to integrate it into a world we must share, a world where what is learned from speech and sign language and lip-reading and captioned screens in train stations and airports and hospital wards and classrooms is all part of the air, and my grandfather returned to Earth as a voice to sermonise our salvation. 'Granddad J.K.,' I'd say, 'we need an ark to connect us to the Deaf world, we need deliverance from the wrath of this all-hearing God,' and grandfather J.K. would ask calmly, thoughtfully, as I feel the electric in my hearing aids meet the electricity of the question, 'Who is on the ark?' And I'd say, 'Granville Redmond is on the ark, his canvas wet with passing storms and luminous lakes; Dorothy Miles is on the ark, signing, speaking, writing all her gestures on deck; Johnnie Ray is on the ark and all his dancing static; David Wright, with or without deaf shame, is on the ark and so is Goya and all the animals in his 'Black Paintings'; owls, elephants, bats, dogs, bulls and large cats, and all the clean and unclean beasts are on the ark; my mother's telephone is on the ark and so are all the teachers and interpreters of the deaf: Thomas Braidwood, Penny Wildes, Renata Deborah, Alfred Evelyn Clakre, Hashem Ghazal, Claudia Gordon,

Antoinette Aiken, Tashi Widmer; forges of good relationships, good listeners on the ark!'

Grandfather J.K. would touch his moustache, knowing who we were about to summon.

'Grandmother Barbara is on the ark, hands clasped, leaning back on her floral arm chair, and so is Grandmother Darcas, literate in land, wood and water; Donald Winnicott is on the ark and so is the kind patience of Mr Barry and Mark the swimming coach with his guested poolside instructions. Who else is on the ark? Thomas Gray's poems and my father's homemade sound system; every smooth and distorted syllable from Blake to Brathwaite; every school of Miss Lou; every dub of Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean 'Binta' Breeze, John Agard and Adrian Mitchell, Gil Scott-Heron, Mutabaruka, Michael Rosen; every talking drum blares like Beethoven on the ark; Zephaniah's megaphoned people power is on the ark; Malika's Kitchen and all her silver and yellow colours are on the ark. Poetry Library librarians are on the ark whispering, "break a line" over all the scribbling poets' shoulders; Meg Day is on the ark, and so is their phrase "deaf kin", Paddy Ladd's phrase "Deafhood", John Lee Clark's

phrase 'hearing canon', Aaron Williamson's phase "Deaf gain", Harriet McBryde Johnson is in her wheelchair on the ark, speaking and speaking, and John Kitto and Pierre Desloges and Jack Clemo's earthly hands are on the ark and, look, my old sign name, "R" Cap, is on the ark and so is my new sign name – the BSL letter R that raises over the head to open all fingers out in the BSL word for *light, shower, sunrays* – all of it is on the ark, smelling like sweat, salt, rivers, oceans, blood, and blood."

[Applause]

CG: That's a great poem you've written there.

RA: How dare you. I did not break my lines.

CG: [Laughs] I want to be on the ark.

RA: You are on the ark. Colin Grant is on the ark.

CG: Thank you. Yeah, yeah. Peace. I wonder whether we could play a bit of Johnnie Ray, and you could explain why he's on the ark?

[Johnnie Ray *Paths of Paradise* plays]

CG: That's great. Thank you very much. Why is Johnnie Ray on the ark?

RA: Johnnie Ray. Do people know Johnnie Ray? No? Johnnie Ray is a largely forgotten deaf man of the '50s. He was a singer, performer, dancer, who was—he had a big hit called *Cry*. And before Elvis, he was seen as the promising superstar of his time, especially because he was a White American man, clearly inspired and influenced by Black American music. But he was deaf. You've heard a deaf man singing. He had two big hearing aids, in the days of the clunky pads and all of that. He used to be on stage dancing and singing with them. He had a management who told him to stop wearing his hearing aids. And I read two biographies of his and watched loads of his performances, and it was fascinating what he had gone through as a deaf man in the public eye, in the 1950s. Because he also had other identities. He was also bisexual; he was also very androgynous looking. He was like an early David Bowie, Prince character. And yeah, like I say, largely forgotten. And I wanted to include him. He's got a whole chapter in the book in which I attempt to unearth his sound, his sensibility, and his, yeah, his way of being a deaf man in the world.

CG: I'm really glad I asked you that question because it's fantastic to learn about him, to be introduced to the way that you've revealed how your life has led you to be on the stage today. And I was really touched by that sense of making active silence [music] because that's what a lot of writing is trying to do: you're trying to reach out and to describe that thing which is known to you, but you want to convey it to other people, don't you? And I do commend Raymond's book to you. It's a really fantastic exercise in the alchemy of turning base metal into gold. It's a golden book. Well done again, Raymond Antrobus.

[Music]

RA: Thank you, Uncle Colin.

[Music and applause]

CG: I was in conversation with the poet, Raymond Antrobus. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Raymond Antrobus was in conversation with Colin Grant

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