

# *British Art Talks* podcast

## Season 3, Episode 4

### Experiments in Art Writing: Roger Robinson

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**Anna Reid:** Hello and welcome to the Spring 21 series of British Art Talks. I'm Anna Reid, Senior Research Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre. This series, Experiments In Art Writing, features a set of innovative and distinctive UK based art writers, asking them to describe the encounters, materials, voices and texts that have shaped the very form of their writing.

Our speaker today, Roger Robinson is a poet and performer based between London and Trinidad. In 2020, he was awarded the RSL Ondaatje Prize for his collection of poems, "A Portable Paradise", for which he also won the TS Eliot prize in 2019. Roger's writing has a rich dialogue with art histories and visual art.

Roger, welcome.

**Roger Robinson:** Thanks Anna. Nice to be here.

**Anna Reid:** Let's, let's start by hearing some of your own writing. In 2013, you published *The Butterfly Hotel*, a collection of poems on the themes of exile, belonging and home. Let's hear a work from the second part of that book, a one that engages with a batik presentation of a woman by Alice M Pashley. This is "A Meditation On a Portrait of a Trinidadian Woman (The Artists Servant)".

**Roger Robinson:** I will say something before I read it. It was a commission, and in the title of the commission it was a picture of a Trinidadian woman, who looked very familiar to me. It's called "Portrait Of A Trinidadian Woman, The Artist's Servant". And I was a bit, I wouldn't say upset, but angry, that they had to put in the power relation between the artist and the person who was being painted and whether or not they could simply put her name.

So this is "Meditation On A Portrait Of A Trinidadian Woman, in brackets, (The Artist's Servant), after Alice M Pashley's batik at the V&A Museum".

**EXTRACT: Roger Robinson - *A Meditation On a Portrait of a Trinidadian Woman (The Artist's Servant)*, after Alice M Pashley's Batik at the V&A.**

*One.*

*Her sackcloth dress itches, but she must sit still.*

*She feels ill from the smell of ash and melting wax.*

*She's lying down, resting on a bed of fig leaves and the eaves of sleep are about to fall.*

*She's bored.*

*She sits up now on the small bench where she shells peas*

*Taking the cooling breeze while sifting dirt between her toes.*

*The sea's night waves are her hair.*

*Her skin is wet sand and her shoulders shrug like she's about to suck her teeth. Now, the fig leaves part for her to see the gate and open road.*

*She stands and boldly walks away, becoming as small as a wax dot.*

*Two.*

*Alice Pashley, that's my mother in your picture.*

*That's the worried forehead of my auntie.*

*That's the long lean neck of my sister.*

*Those are the pursed plump lips of my cousin.*

*They all at one time had to work for the likes of you, who named them servant.*

*They all had to grit their teeth to insults so that their children could eat meat.*

*They all had to lather your screaming children and square the edges of your bedsheets.*

*And because they are not named in your art, I shall name them now:*

*Alicia, Phyllis, Anne, Linda, Florence, Arlene, Monica, Isele, Mavis, Francine, Rose, Grace, Angela.*

*Three.*

*I have given you a name and made a life for you.*

*I shall call you Maria and you live in Belmont.*

*You did well in school, but you did not get a scholarship.*

*You had to stay home and take care of your four brothers and sisters while your father looked for piece work on the docks.*

*You have been cooking, cleaning house, and taking care of babies since you were twelve.*

*By the time you're twenty-five, your family is grown and you start to look for work and you sing for tips in the British bar,*

*Mostly jazz standards in this key of colonial.*

*There's a white woman who stares at you every night.*

*Her name is Alice.*

*She offers you twice as much money to clean her house.*

*So you start cooking and cleaning again,*

*And sometimes you sit for her to paint as you hum "Jelly Roll Blues".*

*One day the bass player from the bar calls for you at Miss Alice gate,*

*And you pack and leave without a goodbye.*

*People say you're a big shot singer in New York now,*

*Singing in front of the Louis Armstrong band,*

*Posing with a rose in your hair for sepia pictures,*

*Looking to the sky, smiling in your sparkling sequined dress.*

**Anna Reid:** Roger you've described already your first encounter with that work, with this batik representation, which seemed incredibly dislocated when you first saw it, and it's part of the collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Can you tell us more about how you came across it, and as part of that collection.

**Roger Robinson:** I came across it because the Victoria and Albert Museum commissioned me to write a poem on a piece of work, and they sent that to me. I have grown up in Trinidad, so I was raised in Trinidad. So they thought that it might be interesting to me, and it

was. But I'm not sure, they expected the poem that they got, but they said they liked it. (Laughs).

**Anna Reid:** Tell us more, why do you think that they may not have expected that? What do you think they expected?

**Roger Robinson:** Something that probably doesn't challenge the status quo as much? I could be wrong. And I think they were probably going into the idea - listen, this is all assumption. I think they wanted me to really take on the idea of Trinidadian-ness and batik. But, you know, my 'in' there was, the kind of power structure of colonialism. And so challenging that. And so I wanted to draw a different story from it, have a different conclusion from what's being shown.

**Anna Reid:** And there's a direct address to the artist in this poem. Can you tell us who is Alice Pashley?

**Roger Robinson:** I actually don't know Alice Pashley very well. As far as I know, she lived a part of her time in Trinidad, but she was actually an English painter, who used batik, which is a very kind of local form of creating art. I don't know why that's taken off in Trinidad, but there are lots of great batik artists like Althea Bastion, and so there's a tradition of batik art making in Trinidad.

**Anna Reid:** And you address the female figure of the batik, the artist's servant, saying, "I have given you a name and made a life for you", which feels so incredibly powerful. What takes place in that creative process of naming?

**Roger Robinson:** Well, as I will probably say, throughout this podcast, I'm trying to look at a painting as a document of history, see where it kind of interacts with what I feel and the personal, that kind of interaction of those things. And then see how I could tease out a different story. Because all these things, or a lot of these paintings, were made under different types of rule of subjugation for Black people in particular. And so if I could go into these things, and draw out something that's different, and look and find and use my imagination to create new stories, I think that's an important part of moving forward. Not just as me as an artist but someone who intersects with politics and history.

**Anna Reid:** Your next chosen excerpt is from the American poet Natasha Trethewey, whose collection *Native Guard* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. We will hear from a 2015 lecture in which she talks about her use of ekphrasis.

**EXTRACT: Natasha Trethewey, reading her poetry at Vanderbilt University**

*One of the things that always influences me, something that I feel dedicated to as a poet, is the intersection between public history and personal history. And all of the poems I write seem to grow out of a concern with those intersections, as well as the*

*contentions between personal history and public history. Often what is written and then sometimes what is left out or erased from the historical record. And I tend to do that in three different ways in particular. One through ekphrasis - through writing about art, photographs, paintings. Also through persona poems, and through the elegy.*

**Anna Reid:** So Roger, Trethewey here talks about the intersection of personal and public histories. That's something that I know is really important to you in your work isn't it.

**Roger Robinson:** Yeah. Natasha Trethewey was kind of touchstone for me when doing this type of work. The idea that you can animate archives and get different perspectives, and probably get a perspective that had been hidden, and the use of imagination to try and get there, how important that imaginary leap is.

**Anna Reid:** You've also chosen another excerpt from that same lecture, where Trethewey's reads from her poem "Mestiso", which is written after an 18th century casta painting by Juan Rodriguez Suarez. She gives an explanation of a casta painting, and then she goes on to read the poem itself.

**EXTRACT: Natasha Trethewey, reading her poetry at Vanderbilt University**

*I got interested in the Mexican casta paintings, and these are paintings in colonial Mexico across the 18th century that represent the mixed blood unions that were taking place in the colony. They were always done in series of sixteen. They began with the white Spaniard father, and you got to see all the different blood mixtures and the offspring they would have produced. The taxonomies created to name these different variations of mixed blood were also written right there on the painting. Another thing about them that was interesting to me is, is some of the ideas that stay with us today. And that is that they believed that across a few generations of mixing, indigenous blood, Indian blood, could be purified to whiteness, but that the taint of African blood was irreversible. So you got names like "mulatto returning backwards", "hold yourself in mid-air", and "I don't understand you".*

*If you were born of mixed blood, your taxonomy, your name was recorded in the Book of Castas at birth, and you were held in thrall to that definition.*

*This is after a series by Juan Rodrigues Juarez circa 1715.*

*Taxonomy. 1: De Español y de India Produce Mestiso.*

*The canvas is a leaden sky behind them / heavy with words / gold letters inscribing an equation of blood / this, plus this, equals this / As if a contract with nature, or a museum label, ethnographic, precise / See how the father's hand beneath its crown of lace curls around his daughter's head / She's nearly fair as he is / calidad / see it in the brooch at her collar, the lace framing her face / An infant she is borne over the*

*servants left shoulder / bound to him by a sling / the plain blue cloth knotted at his throat / If the father, his hand on her skull, divines as the physiognomist does the mysteries of her character / discursive, legible on her light flesh / in the soft curl of her hair / we cannot know it / so gentle the eye he turns toward her / The mother glancing sideways toward him / the scarf on her head white as his face / his powdered wig gestures with one hand a shape like the letter C / See, she seems to say / what we have made / the servant, still a child, cranes his neck, turns his face up toward all of them / he is dark as history / origin of the word 'native' / the weight of blood / a pale mistress on his back / heavier every year.*

**Anna Reid:** OK, so first let's talk about ekphrasis, what is happening, Roger, in this ekphrastic encounter between poets and portraiture.

**Roger Robinson:** It's how narrative imagination can make the jump from paintings, you know, you could probably create counter narratives. Generations need to continue practising survival, that's been the nature of Black people since slavery. So in this particular painting it kind of hints to survivals, and that's what I find interesting about it. And perhaps truly speculations might unveil some truths or even a facade of truth to make up for gaps in the imagination. But we also have different readings of what might have existed. And this type of imagination is important for everyone from Martin Luther King, and everybody who tried to strive for freedom and change what is, would have to use this type of imagination to do it. When Martin Luther King says "I have a dream" he's using his imagination to think of a better future. "That Black boys and Black girls will be playing together". This type of imagination is essential for a people who have been subjugated for hundreds or hundreds of years. Because without that type of imagination, that kind of counter narrative in the mind, you lose hope, and when you lose hope, then it's all over.

**Anna Reid:** Trethewey refers to the child servant's skin in the painting, and saying, "dark as history". And she says "the weight of blood, heavier every year". And she's referring to the child's consciousness, but also a historical consciousness, it feels, what do you make of that?

**Roger Robinson:** Trethewey is actually mixed race. So this has something to do with her own personal life as well. Because she's from a white father, and a Black mother. So she's also trying to think about how it must be for a mixed race child or Black child in that time, where you have a separation due to colours, and you have different types of privileges. So I think that she's, again, kind of connecting her personal history to the history of the time and the painting.

**Anna Reid:** Let's move on to your next chosen extract. Saidiya Hartman is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. And this is Saidiya talking in 2019 on receiving a MacArthur Fellowship about her method of critical fabrication.

**EXTRACT: Saidiya Hartman, talking to the MacArthur Foundation**

*Venus In Two Acts is where I coin the term “critical fabulation” to describe my practice. Critical fabulation was central to being able to resurrect forgotten history, lost lives, the millions of stories that were lost in the Middle Passage. In the book Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, it tells the story of young Black women who are involved in the search for freedom, imagining what a beautiful life can be as the Black ghetto is emerging, and the dreams of the city, what the city could be, what it might be, are being radically restricted. I’m working on several projects now, one is an essay about narrative and the archive, another is a photo-text about Black life. And the third project is a speculative history of a Black woman radical about whom we know little, and the challenge for me is to recreate her interior life. I do the research of a scholar, but I want the work to read with the beauty of a novel.*

*Anna Reid: That was Saidiya Hartman, author of Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments. Roger one of the really striking aspects of Hartman’s writing, is the care and empathy with which she tends to these violated and neglected figures of the archive, glimpsed in photographs and in documents. And it feels as though writing is doing many things in this process. What do you make of it as a transformational process. Is it restorative, cathartic? Or is it about justice? Or is it less than those things?*

**Roger Robinson:** I think it’s all those things and more. I think it questions whose stories underpin the archives of art. Blending the real and imaginary to kind of rebuild worlds around them, to open up other possibilities of the past and contested points of view. I’m really into Saidiya Hartman, because what she’s doing is revolutionary, is nearly making a form of imagination and ekphrasis, and destabilising dominant narratives in the process of that. So yeah, I think it’s amazing work and it’s definitely kind of opening up for me how I can approach my writing. I mean, definitely further on down the line, I’ll definitely write a book of art poems, based on art, especially art that feature Black people, and really treat the art as an archive, find out everything about it, find out when it was painted, see if I could find out characters, find out backstories. But then from there, start really crafting human stories based on imagination, and um, try and destabilise the counter narratives based in kind of, slavery, or colonialism. Because of Saidiya Hartman, I can clearly see myself writing a book like that, like an entire book of critical fabulation using art as archive, and that’s completely new for me. In fact, I think when I first met you, I say, oh, none of my art poems might even go in my book. And I think you said “why?” I was like, “er I don’t know, it’s not a thing I do all the time”. But I’m actually moving towards that. I’m writing a new book at the moment, that interviews a lot of Black people on the coast. But also on the coast, I am looking at the context where they live, and imagining what it has been to live there throughout history. So that’s a kind of critical fabulation in itself, besides the interviews I’m actually doing with people. And I think the book after that will probably be a book on art that features Black people, but also on, on African and traditional art.

**Anna Reid:** There are pitfalls aren't there as well as possibilities. And Hartman poses the question herself in her own writing, about how does one revisit the scene of subjection, without replicating the grammar of violence. Is that something that you've had to contend with in your own writing?

**Roger Robinson:** For sure, because you're not trying to make a sort of porn of suffering. What you're trying to do is create a field of empathy. A moment to moment sensory perception of a thing, in order to create empathy. Because you're not looking for sympathy. You're trying to have it come up on the mainframe of people, so they feel it, how it has been felt. Because then people could go and practice that empathy out in daily life. And that's the rule of the artists for me, or that's a rule of art for me to try and create poems that are empathy machines or create art that are empathy machines, for any time of history, any form. And then, hopefully people could practice that in their everyday lives that they read the poems and think what actually "well actually, what of the empathy practised in these poems I will apply to actual human beings". Because you know, a lot of the barbarism that's happened over the past decade, and going back, is because it's a complete lack of empathy, the reduction of people to units, the reduction of people to numbers, the reduction of people to less than human means it's easy to kill them, because they're not human. But empathy makes you see people as human. Makes their stories important. And as an artist, that's why I think those stories are important. That's why imagination can intercept.

**Anna Reid:** Roger your next extract is the voice of an artist, a painter and a painter of Black figures. Let's hear Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, talking about her mode of practice.

**EXTRACT: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, talking at the 2013 Biennale**

*I work, I work from scrapbooks, I work from drawings, I work from my imagination, it's a combination of all of those things. So um, what I arrive at isn't, you know, it's not traced to any particular one source, it's several sources. The figures are kind of fictitious, they're made up, but they're compositions of scrapbook found images, and imagination, so there's a lot of improvisation that goes on while I'm actually painting. It's hard to know exactly how it's going to look at the, at the end. But I do kind of stick within certain parameters, and each time I have a particular kind of, I suppose, goal for that work, whether it's something to do with colour, or light, or, or form in some way. There are occasionally, there are sometimes things that are sort of, perhaps like stories, but in my own mind, they're not that useful to anyone else and they're not that specific. I think the thing really for me is, is often about, I suppose there's trying to evoke a particular sense of a narrative, or a particular sense of something, without it being extremely specific to anyone else necessarily. There are often pointers like, you know, some of them might look like dancers. I like this idea of um, a sort of ordering to something, you know, this sequence, you know, as something that covers many things but essentially works to a certain logic. And in a way that's partly how I kind of conceived of the group, was very much as a group. I mean for me, that was*

*the link for me anyway, was the idea of the encyclopedic, as this kind of ordering. It's not a way that I always work, but it is a way that I've worked before, you know, and it's something that I like to do is work in, in, work on groups of things, bodies of work, and there being this link, and them making a certain sense, or there being a certain narrative across them, rather than in one particular piece. And this link to language as well is quite important to me.*

**Anna Reid:** That was Lynette Yiadom-Boakye commenting on the protagonists and modulations of her paintings. Roger aside from the extraordinary virtuosity of this artist, what is so exciting to me about this extract is that she has this complete sense of liberty, her experiments in light and colour and form. Is that a sense of liberty that you share in?

**Roger Robinson:** Yeah most definitely. I quite like the idea of the extended story, the series of imaginations. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, she has a series of striped man paintings. And the whole idea that she could take something and extend the story. But it's all based on a mythology that she's making up. She's putting different bits of stories together, different images together, that looks like one cohesive painting at each time. But it's made up of lots of fragmented things. Nearly like sampling to make a perfect hip hop record. That's a kind of fabulation. A holistic whole that you could present that does something. She's not just presenting it as an illustration, she's presenting it as these bits of things are there to try and touch you, to make you think, to make you have a moment. Problematizing the idea and the status of an event that happened. And I think that's very important. That even if we are tackling things as artists, especially Black artists, or anybody, that if it's a history, that you start to problematize, what it is that actually is there, and you can even undermine it.

**Anna Reid:** It's such a different sensibility to that of the index of the photograph, or the archive that we've just described...

**Roger Robinson:** Mm. But it's a critical formulation nevertheless, she only paints Black people, you know, and it's really interesting why she only paints Black people. And also quite interesting, she paints a lot of Black people in repose, which I find very interesting. So if you're a dancer, then they're stretching, if it's a man, he's sitting down, he might be cross-legged, he might be in a relaxation pose. And then you realise that in popular media, you either see Black people as performative or suffering. Rarely do you see Black images of being relaxed, of laying back, of being still, the idea of Black banality. That in itself is kind of revolutionary, because you're challenging the idea of popular media presentation. These are my opinions by the way, this is not necessarily what she says. But for me, that's one of the things I read in the paintings, you know.

**Anna Reid:** I'd love to talk a bit about the sense of humour at play here. Because there is this brilliant and prolonged evasion of being pinned down to time and place by this artist and, it seems to be something that she does in a very good and practiced way across recurrent interviews. Is that something that you do, or do you find yourself having to evade capture?

**Roger Robinson:** You know, I don't really think about that too much, but I respect her vision of it. Because you know, in what she does in a portrait there's such a long, protracted history associated with the portrait, and she's trying to avoid those issues, because she really is doing something just different from being connected to that. I don't particularly do that, but who's to say I won't do it in the future. You know, there's the idea of the African tradition of the trickster. You can't pin them down, and they're always appealing. And throughout history there's been people like that. There've been people like Prince, where you're just like, OK, he's this today, and he's something else tomorrow. He'll never give you too much in an interview. So it kind of maintains that mystery the entire time. And that trickster figure is a fairly iconographic thing in African history, but also in African performers and also in African artists. It's just like, I'm not gonna let you pin me down, because when you pin me down, then, you know, Chris Ofili talks about 'crystallisation', and Chris Ofili tries to shatter the idea of being crystallised, shatter the crystal.

**Anna Reid:** Let's move on in that case to the next extract that you've chosen. And this is from "Ofili In Paradise: Dreaming In Afro", by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, and it was written in 2003, after Hall spent time with the artist Chris Ofili, as he prepared his exhibition for the British pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

**EXTRACT: Stuart Hall - *Ofili In Paradise: Dreaming In Afro***

*Ofili's vision of Paradise may refer somewhere to the Bible, Heaven and the Promised Land – this would not be the first time these very different visions have been condensed in the African imaginary. The eye may have been partly informed, at some level we can't any longer see, by Botticelli's Inferno, or Tintoretto's Paradise. Ofili draws on a rich repertoire of multiple, overlapping references and his knowledge of European painting is extraordinarily wide and sophisticatedly unpredictable. However, his Afro 'Adam and Eve' have had many, more dazzling, disruptive and 'vulgar' antecedents in his work. And, as he told Jonathan Jones about the first Paradise series, there is also somewhere in there "a Caribbean island with aqua-blue water and palm trees and great cocktails and very accommodating natives and then it's back on the charter flight to Leeds". Don't miss the irony, or the last laugh will be on you. Rigorously 'of his time and place', Ofili, the master of Afro-kitsch as high art form, has never taken lessons from anyone about who or what he is entitled to 'mix'.*

**Anna Reid:** That was a reading from Stuart Hall's *Ofili In Paradise: Dreaming In Afro*. Roger, Stuart Hall wrote this text at the time of the artists exhibition at the British Pavilion. And that was a show, which used the colours of the pan-African Union Flag, in it's really full and exuberant visions of paradise. And do you tap this Black utopian mythology? How does it operate in your work?

**Roger Robinson:** I don't tap the utopian mythology. But in my work, I think about what it actually is. What utopia will actually be like. Like, it was really interesting to see that film

about Wakanda, um Black Panther, what they kind of visualise an African utopian paradise might be like. And having said that, it wasn't too far off from the ideas that Chris Ofili had, which made me think have they looked at that, has that come into play in their research to some extent. And so I questioned what paradise could be, what utopias can be, and I kind of approach it from more kind of philosophical viewpoint, in the book, A Portable Paradise, trying to excavate what it philosophically could be. Well, what I do like about Chris is, is that how he could pull together so many things into a unified field, which is something I genuinely do admire in him and something I generally am influenced by him in, it's just like, I can take a painting, I can take Grenfell, I can take this, and pull this into a book, and have this book hold its line. And I think Chris Ofili is particularly good at that. Pulling together lots of, kind of, negative things, and trying to create this thing of beauty and resonance.

**Anna Reid:** Stuart Hall is obviously the writer of this text. What kind of influence did Stuart Hall have in your, in the formation of your writing?

**Roger Robinson:** I mean, Stuart Hall was very interested in visual art. And he was very interested in the lives of Black people. But he was also very interested in academic approaches. And he didn't want it to be that Academy was going to leave out Black people. That's my main influence. I've got a head full of absolutely so many fragments. But what I don't want anything to be, so much that it leaves out, I want to make these complex things simple enough, not simplistic, but simple enough that it could include somebody who does not read often, somebody who's not a big reader of poetry. I don't want to create these complex, lyrical riddles that confuse people so much. I don't want to have somebody have to know the entire background of Greek mythology, just to get the allusions to a poem. That's not what I'm interested in. I'm interested in taking something very complex and making it simple. And I think Stuart Hall was really interested in that too. Not the dumbing down, but the inclusion is what I'm talking about.

**Anna Reid:** Let's talk about white sands, green hills and fresh fish, because you were born in London and spent much of your childhood in Trinidad. And Chris Ofili visited Trinidad for the first time I think in his 30s and moved there. How is Trinidad at work in your imaginary as a writer?

**Roger Robinson:** You know, I mean, that's a massive question. Let me see if I could pull it down into different strands. I went to a secondary school, which is considered one of the best secondary schools in the country. It's called Naparima College. And a lot of the people who work there were artists, or who were not making a living as artists, but really respected artists. One of them was Ralph Maraj, who was a prominent playwright, eventually ended up becoming a minister in Trinidad. But under the influence of him, and other people who taught me art, who taught me how to think, my education was quite revolutionary. And it was quite based in the idea of mission and purpose. It was a school started by Canadian missionaries. And we had to serve our communities. That was an important part of

everything we were doing, that being a leader, didn't mean that people worked for you, it meant that you were trying to help people. You are trying to serve people. And coming from parents - my mother who is a Christian, but a Christian of action, and she's also a nurse who goes out in communities to help people. So what I come from is, never so much as an artist trying to, you know, you're trying to establish your reputation. But who are you serving? And how are you serving them? And so that social education in Trinidad has been very important to me, especially living in England, and also why I write, and what I try to take on. Because I'm really not interested in the props that I get as a writer, I'm only interested in it in terms of how can it help me to serve a wider bunch of people. And not just Black people, you know, I'm interested in all oppressed people.

**Anna Reid:** I wonder if we can link this back to Ofili.

**Roger Robinson:** I mean, there's one interesting thing about Ofili that I want to mention. Is like, I've met him, we know each other. I spent time with him. He grew up in an England that was full of racist media language and images about Black people. And so he would grow up where even Black people like Lenny Henry was sending up their own selves in racist ways. He was growing up where there would be racism in shows, yeah, because he's close to my age, he's probably about 51, 52. Now, how he takes all these kind of things that may either be derogatory, and he makes these small collages, cut things up, things like elephant dung, to kind of create this whole is amazing. Considering that his whole life, he would have been exposed to racist images of himself in media. And to try and make something utopian now, I think is, he's never said this to me, but it's like he's trying to create an anti-venom, anti-venom, to all the poisonous things that he might have absorbed while growing up. He's not told me this, but I reckon him going to Trinidad is that it is a space of mystery and mythology, but also incredible beauty. I've been to his house, where he stays in the forest, and it's, I grew up most of the time in Trinidad, and I've never seen anything like this. He is looking for beauty. He's trying to combat all the ugliness that Black people have been fed in England. My views not his, by the way. Chris, if it is you don't agree with me, I'm sorry!

**Anna Reid:** At the beginning of the episode you spoke of the women of your family. You spoke of Alicia, Phyllis, Anne, Linda, Florence, Arleen. Tell us about those women.

**Roger Robinson:** Oh, my God. Are you trying to make me cry Anna?

**Anna Reid:** (Laughs). Yes!

**Roger Robinson:** One, they're all real woman, and these are the woman, just a woman in my family. Phyllis is my mother, she is a health worker. And she had an incredible knack of being creative in order to do her job. So one story I could tell you is, being a health worker there was a lot of distrust amongst country people to the government. A lot of the visiting nurses couldn't get the information from country people. But my mom understood that they have to know you, trust you, and spend time with you before they can give you any personal

information. And so that's what my mother did. So I have loads of memories of driving for hours into mango fields, just heading up to some woman's house who cooked, and hanging out, it didn't feel like work at all. But my mom would laugh, they'd talk, they'd gossip, they'd bring out food, we'd eat, listen to music. And then eventually because that woman was somebody who was trusted in our community, and my mother gained her trust, with her kind of creative storytelling and her insights, then all the people of that community would come and they would trust her. And then we drive back all the hours and it's only until I'm an adult I understood that she was, you know, using her creative citizenship to do something. Because she'd get back home really late, and be writing in all the information that she needed in the files, not while she was there, but at home late into the night, because when she was there, was just to share time with them. I can't go to all these women and tell you every story, we would be here all night.

**Anna Reid:** We would listen all night! It would be wonderful.

**Roger Robinson:** Trust me! That's how my mother is, and she's an incredible storyteller. If you came to our house at dinner, it will always be a conversation, and somehow she'll try to slip in and try to make you a Christian, but not in an invasive way. But whilst if you're enjoying yourself, she would say "you should think about God". So she's from about 13 children and from a big oral tradition.

**Anna Reid:** How amazing.

**Roger Robinson:** Yeah.

**Anna Reid:** Thank you for sharing that, that's awesome sounds like an incredible incredible woman.

**Roger Robinson:** She is, she is.

**Anna Reid:** So revelatory of course, in terms of your writing as well. Let's close this episode as we started with your own writing. Let's hear you reading from *A Portable Paradise*, and you have chosen a poem that addresses a 1725 painting by Bartholomew Dandridge. It is a poem that speaks of pain and of peacock feather. This is a *Young Girl with a Dog and a Page*.

**Extract: "Young Girl With A Dog And A Page", by Roger Robinson**

*A Young girl with a Dog and a Page. Bartholomew Dandridge, circa 1725, oil on canvas, 48 by 48 inches.*

*In the painting you're behind the dog*

*an accoutrement like the fermenting grapes and rotten peaches in the basket that you hold*

*You look at her in her lace trim dress,*

*Not as a childhood friend, but like a deity you worship.*

*But there's something in your acting that speaks of pain,*

*Perhaps because you and the dog have the same collar.*

*Perhaps, not for the first time, you know you are less important than the dog.*

*Even the painter cannot ignore the wet sadness of your eyes,*

*He tries to tone it down by lighting the girl and the dog brightly.*

*But all that does is make you a darkness in the background,*

*A dark and ghostly presence, staring through history.*

*But I cannot leave you as a ghost, so I'll name you Kwaman, from the Akans,*

*And put you in fine blue linens, place her unlit behind the dog, an animal collar around her alabaster neck.*

*You're in a fine hat with a peacock feather*

*And I'll have her look at you in awe.*

**Anna Reid:** Roger thank you for joining us.

**Roger Robinson:** Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

**Anna Reid:** Thanks to our reader, Gershwin Eustache Junior. Thanks also to our producer Miranda Hinkley. A full list of the excerpts featured in this episode can be found on the Paul Mellon Centre website. And that's where you can also find all four episodes from the series Experiments In Art Writing. Thank you for listening.

## **Works referenced in this episode**

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