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THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

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**Word of Mouth: RAYMOND ANTROBUS**

**TX: 28.05.2019 1600-1630**

**Presenter: Michael Rosen**

**Michael Rosen:** Hello. Today on the programme we have a guest who I've known for some five or six years. The first time I met him he was studying for an MA in how to be a writer/teacher. Then I seem to have blinked and he's just won the Ted Hughes award for a new work in poetry. I'm talking today to Raymond Antrobus. Ray, hello.

**Raymond Antrobus:** Hello

**Michael:** Can we begin with a poem?

**Raymond:** Sure, yeah, I'm going to read this poem called Sound Machine, so this poem opens with a couple of lines from James Thomson, a English 17<sup>th</sup> century poet, from a poem that was just called simply Sonnet.

(READS POEM)

**Sound Machine**

'My mirth can laugh and talk, but cannot sing;

My grief finds harmonies in everything'

JAMES THOMSON

And what comes out if it isn't the wires

Dad welds to his homemade sound system,

which I accidently knock loose  
while he is recording Talk-Over dubs, killing  
the bass, flattening the mood and his muses,  
making Dad blow his fuses and beat me.  
But it wasn't my fault; the things he made  
could be undone so easily –  
and we would keep losing connection.  
But praise my Dad's mechanical hands.  
Even though he couldn't fix my deafness  
I still channel him. My sound system plays  
On Father's Day in Manor Park Cemetery  
where I find his grave, and for the first time  
see his middle name, OSBERT, derived from Old English  
meaning *God* and *bright*. Which may  
have been a way to bleach him, darkest  
of his five brothers, the only one sent away  
from the country to live up-town  
with his light skin aunt. She protected him  
from police, who didn't believe he belonged  
unless they heard his English,  
which was smooth as some up-town roads.  
His aunt loved him and taught him  
to recite Wordsworth and Coleridge – rhythms  
that wouldn't save him. He would become  
Rasta and never tell a soul about the name  
that undid his blackness. It is his grave  
that tells me the name his black

body, even in death, could not move or mute.

**Michael:** Raymond, straight away in that poem you take us to sound, and to language; language in his name, running the sound system, and you've got the dub and bass playing there. So tell us a bit about what sound means to you.

**Raymond:** Yeah so this poem is primarily about my Dad's relationship with sound, and how he in his council flat he used to go out in the street, go to the skips and he would find broken speakers and wires, and literally he would take all of this what would appear to be junk home, and he would sit in his room and he would make sound systems, and he would even record his voice over the dub, so he might have like I don't know, Lee Scratch Perry, who's the originator of dub, he would take some Lee Scratch Perry songs and he would dub over his dub, so you might hear like (sings drum beat) and my Dad's voice would come in like "Slow down alright, here come the rhythm", and then sometimes he would quote the bible or something: "Man was born to multiply, yeah man, here we go" (sings drum beat). So it was this whole thing that he did, and I've got so many memories of watching him do that, you know.

**Michael:** But why was he doing that? Was he doing that to entertain you?

**Raymond:** Just something to entertain himself. You know. Like, he left Jamaica as a young man, so I think it was his way of staying connected to his island, and I think he wanted me to see it so he could give something of the island to me.

**Michael:** Now in other poems you talk about how he viewed you and you're speaking in a certain way and he's picking up that there's certain things you can't hear.

**Raymond:** Yeah

**Michael:** How did he relate to the fact that he could see you not hearing certain things?

**Raymond:** Hmm, it confused him, and then when he was finally told, a doctor came by and said, listen your son is deaf, um, he was like "Oh, ok." You know he never used the word deaf he used the word limited, because he thought that calling someone deaf was an insult, and people do, that's still a common thing, I still come across that quite a bit, of people saying "oh no no, you're just impaired,

you're hearing..." and that's a lot more aggressive to me than saying deaf. It's fine, you can say deaf it's a neutral word, you know. So with my dad, I think he... a lot of hearing parents of deaf children, I've worked in deaf education and seen this first hand, you often find that they grieve – there's often sadness about having a deaf child.

**Michael:** And also you say that your father had a view of that word 'deaf' that related back to Jamaica. This word 'deaf', as you say, you want to claim it as a neutral word but say in Jamaica, in your father's generation it wasn't neutral.

**Raymond:** Yeah, and it came attached to stigmas, um, a friend of his who got into a fight in a school in Kingston where my dad went to school, he was stabbed in both his ears with pencils and went profoundly deaf, and this student was removed from the school and my dad never saw him again, and the way that my dad in his mind concluded that story was kind of 'Oh, he had to go somewhere, he could no longer operate, I suppose, in our school', almost like he'd been sent to a leper colony or something, it was that severe in his mind, but actually what may have happened was he went to a deaf school, probably had to learn sign language, and that's fine, he had to find another way to function in the hearing world.

**Michael:** And that's what you did. You've learned to sign

**Raymond:** Yeah

**Michael:** Obviously here we are sitting opposite each other. You can hear me

**Raymond:** Yeah.

**Michael:** I can hear you, we're talking to each other but you learned signing. Why did you do that?

**Raymond:** So I had some lessons in a hearing school, in a mainstream school, and some lessons in a deaf school. Thanks to my parents really kind of pushing for it, I was given speech therapy, hearing therapy, I was given really powerful hearing aids and radio aids so I could hear in the classrooms. Something I wasn't given at that point was a cultural understanding of deafness, that with deaf community comes sign language, comes you know, a history, a way of being, right, that isn't better or worse, it's just different, right? So from when I was about eleven years old I started learning signing but sometimes I had hearing friends who would see me sign and they would say 'why are you

doing that thing with your hands?’ And then I would have some deaf friends who would see me talking and not signing and would say: “what are you doing? Do you think you are better than us?” you know, so there was a whole kind of paradox to navigate, but ultimately what happened was I became embarrassed actually, about being deaf and I stopped wearing my hearing aids and I stopped signing.

**Michael:** But signing, if you sign, and speak and hear, and also you have your father’s language and the language you’re speaking to me now, you’re at least tri-lingual aren’t you

**Raymond:** yeah

**Michael:** You’re operating in at least three languages, dialects at any given moment.

**Raymond:** Oh absolutely, and it’s only now I’ve achieved this kind of status as poet that I really see the benefits of that. To me growing up I felt like a burden, I just wanted to be like everyone else. But even then I was writing. Even then I was writing poetry, I was writing music, song lyrics. At one point I thought I was writing rap verses, and it wasn’t until a teacher and a friend they read what I’d written and said ‘this is poetry’ (laughs), so you know it’s a funny thing.

**Michael:** But it’s also about identity isn’t it, because you can slide between is it three identities, does it feel like that? When you’re signing... no that doesn’t work does it, I was going to say when you’re signing you’re the deaf person, when you’re speaking you’re not, that’s crazy that doesn’t work.

**Raymond:** I mean what it makes me think of is Du Bois’ idea of double consciousness. Du Bois is this African-American philosopher, teacher of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, and how every black person needs a kind of consciousness of the black and the white world, and for me it was a consciousness of the black and the white and the hearing and the deaf, so yeah it was quadruple consciousness in some ways. You can compartmentalise in some ways every part of who we are into identities, you know, my sexuality, my maleness whatever, there’s also an identity and a language that comes around that, you know even being a gardener has a language.

**Michael:** And then it all blurs and melds in a way that’s a bit more like cooking isn’t it

**Raymond:** Yeah

**Michael:** you can separate out the ingredients but actually when the cake's made, it's there.

**Raymond:** (laughs) yeah, this is the thing, there are many many ways of being deaf, there isn't one. And medically you have mild deafness going down to profound deafness. But I have a deafness which tips every scale of deafness. I am mild to profoundly deaf. What it's about is the frequencies. So I don't hear any high pitched sounds. I'd never heard a bird in my life till I got hearing aids. I used to play football with my hearing aids off and I never forgot this referee (laughs) this referee would blow his whistle and I remember being completely confused about why this referee was putting this thing in his mouth and the first time I got hearing aids and I played football and I saw a referee blow a whistle, I couldn't believe it. Oh my god that's the sound he's been making all this time. I've seen so many different versions of this. A deaf person saying to me: "you can tell that person's hearing because you can see the noise in their eyes". And I know exactly what they mean, I know exactly what that is, that kind of noisy eye. Sometimes I, for the whole day I walk around with my hearing aids off to preserve my sanity in some ways. You know, I wear two hearing aids; they're digital, they're very powerful, and I don't have a choice about what sounds I can hear. It's not selective to me, I can hear whatever the dominant sound is in the room. But once I've turned off my hearing aids it feels like there's a blanket thrown over the entire world and nothing, and yeah, I like that muffled that under-blanket sound. It gives me a different energy, a different way of moving through my day, you know.

**Michael:** Erm, let's talk a bit about signing. Sometimes when I'm performing I have a signer next to me and of course I'm always tempted to stop performing and have a look at what they're doing, but then I've stopped talking so it doesn't work you know, it's kind of totally absurd, but I'm trying to keep an eye open because I'm waving my arms about in the way that I do and they're waving their arms about and I'm thinking am I doing a form of sign language? Because I do a lot of extreme gestures.

**Raymond:** It probably isn't signing that you're doing, Michael.

**Michael:** Absolutely (laughs)

**Raymond:** But what is probably the closest it could get to is V V, which stands for Visual Vernacular. So what you could be doing, is interpreting, I suppose, making a shape with your hands, of something that represents an image that suits what you're saying. So that's a kind of home made (laughs) explanation of V V. I'm not an authority figure of sign language, this is just, you know, this is my experience.

**Michael:** I love it, I know very very little about it. Are you using your whole body? Your hands?

**Raymond:** It depends, so since *The Perseverance*, which is the name of the last book I wrote, has come out, I tried to have as many readings with sign-language interpreters – Jacqui Beckford, Anna Kitson, Clare Edwards; so sometimes they'll come away from a literal translation of my poem, of a line, and they would go into V V, visual vernacular, and create a shape with their body, just really take to another dimension; I just shake my head and say my God, you're a genius. The possibilities are endless and that's what makes signing, interpreting, you know, BSL poetry completely its own thing, and completely away from the written word.

**Michael:** Take us to a phrase or a word, tell me what you're doing with your hands and how that could expand into other areas.

**Raymond:** OK, so, erm, it's a visual language so it's really difficult to explain this. I've heard signers that I've worked with say "In your box of air I'd like you to make this shape". Their box of air could be literally their torso. It could be their head. In BSL, a subject –

**Michael:** - that's British Sign Language –

**Raymond:** - British Sign Language – the subject has to be said first so the syntax is always different. So, ok, so we're at a table now, so it would be 'table sat on' rather than 'we are sat at the table'. You have to be situated, you have to know concretely that we're talking about a table before we know what we're going to be doing with it. Before we know if we're going to be sitting on it or throwing it. You know.

**Michael:** So there's a sign for table.

**Raymond:** There'd be a sign for table yeah.

**Michael:** So with the hands we're doing a flat shape, we draw the sides down there so it's kind of like a box without a bottom.

**Raymond:** Right

**Michael:** So you announce that with your first gesture

**Raymond:** That's right. So: 'table', and then 'sat'.

**Michael:** 'Sat at', so you've got your two fists in together, you've got your elbows out and then you pull your elbows down.

**Raymond:** yeah

**Michael:** And how do we know who's at the table?

**Raymond:** Eye contact, smile at that person, acknowledge that person, or you could even say 'you'

**Michael:** That's sort of like a fist coming towards

**Raymond:** - coming towards you slightly and you say 'yours'. The possibilities are endless and that's the thing that's so fascinating to me about British Sign Language in some ways it resists common, spoken, standard English, it resists it.

**Michael:** yes

**Raymond:** Er, there are many people who feel like, that standard English doesn't represent them, it doesn't consider their way of being, you know their culture.

**Michael:** So I've just reduced it to the words that I understand. I'm being nastier to me than you want to be,

**Raymond:** (laughs)

**Michael:** so there's something else in a different medium altogether.

**Raymond:** Completely, completely. And that's what makes signing a very powerful and empowering, and important part of a deaf person's identity.

**Michael:** And when you were at school and learning this, was that a positive experience, that someone was taking you into this new language that you hadn't experienced at home – neither of your parents were signers?

**Raymond:** No, no. Yeah, they're both hearing, and they were at a loss for what the needs would be for a deaf young boy growing up in Hackney. You know, 'cause there weren't any deaf schools in Hackney so they had to find a deaf school in Muswell Hill.

**Michael:** So your first teachers, it's almost like you know, when we see children have come from another country and they arrive and they can't speak the language, you've got teachers who are saying "well this is how it goes". How old were you?

**Raymond:** Eleven years old. I had a British Sign Language teacher who was profoundly deaf and she would just start off with the alphabet, so A, B, C, D, E...

**Michael:** So you're now drawing signs with your fingers and hands to do each individual letter...

**Raymond:** each individual letter right, so you had to get down the alphabet first, that was important. And then every lesson you had to begin with being able to sign your name, then kind of build on your signing from there.

**Michael:** But earlier when you told me about 'table' and 'we're sitting at', you weren't spelling it out as T-A-B-L-E

**Raymond:** No, no exactly, but what the finger spelling alphabet does is any signing you don't know you can then spell it. You know so, 'oh, I don't know the sign for table, but I can go T-A-B-L-E. You know

**Michael:** So in a way this is bilingual within sign language –

**Raymond:** Yeah

**Michael:** - because when you're signing a whole table, that seems to sort of belong totally to the deaf world. You mentioned earlier speech therapy and hearing therapy. What was that like?

**Raymond:** Speech therapy was about the fact that I was slurring so many of my words. I had, I still have it at home, a long list of all the words that I couldn't say, so by the time I'm eleven, I still have the writing and reading age of a six year old. I can't spell these words, I can't pronounce them. So it's a very slow process to get you to make shapes with your mouth which deliver sounds, that you can't hear yourself, into the world.

**Michael:** So were you encouraged to put your fingers on your lips and on your tongue?

**Raymond:** No that's a very old way of doing it. (laughs)

**Michael:** (laughs) yeah, that dates me Ray. Thank you! (laughs)

**Raymond:** yeah, no, it's about feeling your mouth, knowing where the tongue lands. My memories of it are quite hazy. I'm not a speech therapist, so ... I'm like nine years old when I start it. But I do remember a whole thing about how air moves through the teeth, how you want to lick certain parts of your teeth to make certain sounds. But there were certain sounds I just didn't hear at all, so I remember coming across this word – this was a bit later on – but this word; I'm going to say it now. Cri... cr...c... cru..cru.... (laughs) One second, one second! Cri-ti-ci-sm. Cri-ticism. Criticism. Criticism! It's a word I always need a like, run up for. 'Cause there are three sounds in that word that I don't hear. Cri...sis...sis...sm. It's, I don't hear any high pitched sounds, and that word is almost entirely a high pitched sound. So, it's quite bizarre for me to make a sound I've literally never experienced. And that idea is something that has harmed a lot of deaf people. Because it's made them feel inferior, because they can't do something. You know, they're told that they're failing to do something that just naturally isn't within their means. But there are other things they can do, like sign. Like have this box of air, which to me is as sophisticated and as useful for communicating, you know like, that kind of hierarchy, how we are the people who are less because we can't you know, make a sound which is understood by other people, but many people can't make these shapes that is understood by people like us.

**Michael:** And when you move about the country or indeed go to other parts of the world, are you aware of dialects within sign language?

**Raymond:** Oh, wow that's a great question. You're the first hearing person to say that. Yeah there are dialects within every sign language, so I was speaking with a deaf person in Birmingham recently, and they asked me where do they live so I said 'I live in Hackney'.

**Michael:** Right, so let's describe your gestures, so fist on your chest,

**Raymond:** yeah, 'live'. This finger.

Michael: Middle finger to thumb. And you did a little gesture by your shoulder.

Raymond: shoulder, yeah and that means 'live', and then Hackney is this...

**Michael:** So that's the old way we used to do a telephone gesture

**Raymond:** like shake your fist about like it's a bit cool. Like 'Hackney'

**Michael:** to and fro, for 'Hackney'

**Raymond:** (laughs) and he stopped me and said "this sign" (which to mean means 'live') "so that sign means in my dialect: 'toilet'". "So you just said 'I go to the toilet in Hackney'". And it was this moment where it's like 'no, that's 'live'. You know so we had this whole, 'o wow that's funny' you know, got the same signs which literally mean something completely different. And I saw the same thing when I was in New Zealand. New Zealand has a really interesting sign language, 'cause we have the same British Sign Language finger spelling alphabet, but then it's like, built on a completely... like some of the syntax is different, so you know...how many islands there are in New Zealand, and some of the signing even within New Zealand varies from island to island. So there's even a Māori sign language which has its own roots.

**Michael:** And does that go back way way, pre-the British settling?

**Raymond:** Oh yeah. Oh yeah. It's interesting isn't it like when you... thinking about colonialism provides languages, and there are some sign languages which would be completely de-colonised because like you say they would exist way before settlers arrived and took over their language.

**Michael:** Yes. I sometimes think that having bilingualism, trilingualism, it's like having other rooms. I'm not bad at French; if I'm in France long enough I can go into this other room and I'm suddenly saying things - I don't have to think how to say it - and it feels like I've gone into the French room. Makes me think that you can inhabit these different rooms or slide between them.

**Raymond:** But every one of those rooms has a different history, has a different landscape, has a different way of seeing itself and understanding itself and, you know, there's... there's blood on the walls in some of those rooms, you know. And that's something that I think about.

**Michael:** And is it your blood on the walls or do you have a sense that this goes back, twenty years, fifty years, two hundred years?

**Raymond:** Oh, hundreds of years. Centuries of blood on those walls. Jennifer Ismael, who is an American academic in deaf history, she had this one line where she says: "the root of oppression for deaf people is being forced to speak". I never forgot that, because it reminded me of again, some of the fear and intimidation that came around speech therapy. Being told that I can't say these words, that I'm lacking. It was framed in a way, yeah, I often left those sessions feeling like I'd failed something. I don't know, it's complicated actually.

**Michael:** Putting myself in the shoes of the teacher, thinking 'well this is going to enable you to do this Raymond. This is going to enable you to do this!' But as a child you just might feel, well – this is what I don't have.

**Raymond:** Yeah, and –

**Michael:** So it can be both at the same time can't it?

**Raymond:** – I think that's it. The thing that was lacking there in that relationship was the awareness of deafhood, of deafness as a cultural identity, as an understanding. As opposed to you just have a spoken and written language, and that is how you're going to be measured, you know, that's the only value system that exists in this space. And again, this is very specific to my own experience, I had a few deaf friends at school who would just look at me and shake their heads and be like 'why are you so tormented by this? Don't you get it? Like – you're deaf, it's fine, you know'

**Michael:** oh, right why weren't they tormented then, why were you?

**Raymond:** because I think they accepted it. They found a way to embrace and feel connected I think to a deaf community, and I think many of them were born deaf, it didn't come later. It was understood straightaway, like I was born deaf but I wasn't understood straight away, so there was all of these journeys. It was always this clinical thing. But then three years ago I went to Gallaudet University, which is the only deaf university in the western world, it's in DC.

**Michael:** Washington DC?

**Raymond:** In America, yeah. And I got to see what deaf spaces are. True kind of deaf spaces that are classrooms curated for every level of deafness, even deaf blind students. And this classroom you have a big screen at the front of the class, captions on the screen, interpreters at the side of the screen, even some of the deaf blind students sit with interpreters who sign the words on the students hand. And I sat in on a lesson about citizenship: what makes a man, what makes a person... I just sat in this lesson completely emotional, because I never know that this exists. And that there has been so many years of teachers and teachers of the deaf who have campaigned to make a space like deaf spaces exist. But they're only in this one university in the world. Something that I feel is an injustice.

**Michael:** Yes. So, give us another poem. Shall we have Jamaican British?

**Raymond.** Oh sure, ok. So this poem is a ghazal, which just means that there are two words at the end of the line that repeat. And I wrote it partly inspired by a poet called Aaron Samuels, also partly inspired by another poet/rapper called Jay-Z. He actually has a few rap verses where he follows a ghazal form, so: Jamaican British

**(Reads poem)**

## **Jamaican British**

After Aaron Samuels

Some people would deny that I'm Jamaican British.

Anglo nose. Hair straight. No way I can be Jamaican British.

They think I say I'm black when I say Jamaican British

but the English boys at school made me choose: Jamaican, British?

Half-caste, half mule, house slave - Jamaican British.

Light skin, straight male, privileged - Jamaican British.

Eat the callaloo, jerk chicken – I'm Jamaican

British don't know how to serve our dishes; they enslaved us.

At school I fought a boy in the lunch hall - Jamaican

At home, told Dad, *I hate dem, all dem Jamaicans* – I'm British

He laughed, said, *you cannot love sugar and hate your sweetness,*

And took me straight to Jamaica – passport: British.

Cousins in Kingston called me Jah-English

Proud to have someone in their family - British

Plantation lineage, World War service, how do I serve

Jamaican British?

When knowing how to war is Jamaican British.

**Michael:** Oh wonderful. That, that form there that runs through the poem, it's like a spine to the poem.

**Raymond:** And that's the thing I love about that poem, you can say it's a rap and you can say it's a Ghazal. It's this ancient Iranian form which follows fourteen to seventeen beats on the line. I love it because it just blurs all of those kind of lines about purist idea about what sound should a poem be making.

**Michael:** Also it carries the tension. 'Cause the tension in you – Jamaican? British? British? what are you? come on own up! come on Raymond tell me!

**Raymond:** (laughs)

**Michael:** what are you? how dare you be one of the other? And you say an ancient form, I know from reading your book, that you draw on going back to Dickens and his attitudes, and also Shakespeare. So, when I contrast you now with the way you've described yourself as a boy, you've got a sense of history and lineage, much more than you did.

**Raymond:** The way in which you use language, the way in which you articulate yourself and who you are to the world, very much manifests in the environment you find yourself in. And I have really found writing poetry, being a poet, finding ways to articulate who I am to the world has manifested a different kind of world for me, which is difficult, which is interesting, particularly if you're a poet and you're trying to root all of this in language.

**Michael:** Which is what poetry is.

**Raymond:** Which is what poetry is, exactly. So it's a madness to me that anyone would have, going back to that Jamaican British poem, that anyone would say "I am one thing". "My identity is one thing." "My language is one thing." What the Jamaican British poem is doing is mocking that idea, saying you're absurd if you think that's reality.

**Michael:** Raymond Antrobus, thank you very much indeed.

**TRANSCRIPT ENDS**