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Episode 100: Octavia Collective: a takeover – (05/06/2017)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Host: Rachel Long - **RL**

Guests: Tania Nwachukwu – **TN** & Sunayana Bhargava **– SB**

Conversation:

RL: Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I am Rachel Long and I am joined today by Tania Nwachukwu and Sunayana Bhargava. We are all members of Octavia Poetry Collective. Octavia is led by me, we are housed at South Bank Centre in London. I'm often asked why I set up Octavia. It always seems to be the first question on the lips of any interviewer or

interested party. I always feel like saying: 'Durr!" But I refrain. At least, I have so far. I say this: Octavia was born out of an aching necessity to create an exclusive space within literature where women of colour could come together to read, write, share, grow.

A space where we might do these things in peace, without being silenced or made spokespeople, without our writing being boxed, exoticised or labelled representative, raw, traumatic or heartbreaking. There are 17 members of Octavia. We are poets but also educators, dancers, photographers, astrophysicists. This makes our collective voice zoetic and nuanced. Since our creation in September 2015, Octavia have performed at the London Literature Festival, have featured on BBC World Service and in The Guardian.

We've run workshops at the University of Oxford and for the Serpentine Galleries. Octavia featured in the spring Knowledge Is Power issue of ASOS magazine and we closed this year's Women of the World Festival with our poetic response to Margaret Atwood's novel The Handmaid's Tale. I am joined today by two distinguished members of Octavia, incredible poets and women in their own right. Hello Tania, Hello Sunayana.

TN/SB: Hi Rachel.

RL: We'll be discussing the work of two poets that we've selected today. One literary heritage poet, June Jordan, and one contemporary poet, Safia Elhillo. Tania and Sunayana were given the challenge of writing one poem in response to both poets' works. We'll be hearing those soon, I cannot wait, but just to contextualise the task, David of Lunar Poetry Podcasts and I have been talking for a long time about Octavia featuring on this podcast, at least a year, maybe more.

From the very beginning, David said that he wanted Octavia's show to be a little different. What we decided on was this. To do a sort of takeover. To not centre our own work solely, but to frame it around what has come before us and also, what is being written around us. What our peers and our sisters are exploring right now. For Women of the World 2016, South Bank and the Poetry Library invited Octavia to create a resource on our recommendations for the unsung women-of-colour poets within their collection.

We embarked on what became part-research project, part-commission as we each wrote in response to one poem by our selected poet. This culminated in a performance at the Poetry Library, where we read our response poems and one other of our own. What was really interesting about it is that it became a conversation. The response poems were not echoes, but replies. We were tracing our literary and cultural roots. We were entering and documenting a discourse across generations and across waters.

I felt that what we started there was really important. I believe one has to know where they come from to be able to move forwards. I've only just watched I Am Not Your Negro, the James Baldwin film and he says in it: 'History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history. If we pretend otherwise, we are literary criminals.' I've said literary! 'We are *literally* criminals.' Uncle James is talking about black people's struggle in America, but I think it can be applied and extended even to literature. We have to read back to write forwards.

I feel the Canon is this and the Canon promotes this, but the Canon is biased. The Canon, I feel, in an old boys' club, it only includes and promotes the work of Western white men. Therefore, what we must do is challenge it and if it refuses to be challenged, then we must make our own Canon. This is part of that. So I selected June Jordan as our literary heritage poet because she is one of the great mothers, I feel, of our Canon. She's one of the most widely-published and highly-acclaimed writers of her generation.

When I was seeking out June Jordan's bio online, interestingly, the Poetry Foundation web page says she's 'one of the most widely-published and highly-acclaimed African-American writers of her generation'. I use the word 'interesting' in a scholarly way, which really means it's bullshit. June Jordan was born in Harlem in 1936 and grew up in Brooklyn. Her parents were Jamaican immigrants. She was a poet, essayist, journalist, playwright, novelist, librettist, tireless activist and a teacher.

June Jordan was, is, a prolific, passionate and influential voice for liberation, who lived and worked on the front lines of American poetry, political vision and moral witness. She died in Berkeley, California in 2002, leaving us a mountain of literary and political works, 27 volumes in total, 27 volumes of poetry, essays, libretti and works for children. I picked up her book for this particular research project and it was like walking out with The Bible from Foyles.

I've chosen Ms June Jordan as our literary heritage poet because of how she weaves the personal and political, how she engaged with the pressing struggles of her era, which I believe are still the struggles of our own era: civil rights, women's rights, gay rights and sexual freedom. Safia Elhillo is the author of The January Children, published by the University of Nebraska Press 2017. She's Sudanese by way of Washington DC. She received a BA from NYU and an MFA in Poetry at the New School.

Safia is a Pushcart Prize nominee, co-winner of the 2015 Brunel University African Poetry prize and winner of the 2016 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets. In addition to appearing in several journals and anthologies, including the BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry In The Age of Hip-Hop, her work has been translated into Arabic, Japanese, Estonian and Greek. She is the co-editor of the anthology Halal If You Hear Me.

I selected Elhillo as our contemporary poet because of the way she explores selfhood, otherness, language, leaving and loss, because of the way she problematizes place and the concept of home. When I hear the word diaspora, I think of Elhillo's poems. I'm going to invite Tania and Sunayana to read a poem by each of our chosen poets. Tania will read an excerpt of June Jordan's Who Look At Me, 1969 and Sunayana will read Safia Elhillo's To Make Use Of Water, 2017.

[The authors have not given their permission for these poems to be included in this transcript.]

[0:11:47]

RL: Thank you. Your pauses there… You read that so beautifully, I was like: 'Don't cry, you've got to get through this.' Your pauses, can you explain why, why you left pauses, especially in that first stanza?

SB: I think the first stanza talks a lot about her confusion knowing half of two languages, English and Arabic, so in a lot of the first stanza, there are actually Arabic words next to the English equivalent, so 'I forget the English word for "forget"' and the pause is supposed to signify the Arabic word that I can't say either.

RL: No one could come to your rescue in this room.

SB: So the pauses are there just to show the presence of another language.

RL: I think the silence works as well. So, to you both in turn. Tania first, as you read first, were you already familiar with June Jordan and/or Safia Elhillo's work before this project?

TM: I was familiar with June's work because I had a collection of her love poems, which were beautiful and felt really urgent. I think 'urgent' is the best way to describe it. At the time, it was something that I needed, so it came at the right time and she's stayed with me. Safia I came to via the Brunel Poetry prize. When I was going through the winners, I came across her work and I loved how she explored two different languages, because that's something I find I'm always trying to navigate, understanding and learning two different languages.

RL: Do you speak another language?

TM: I speak Igbo and I learnt conversational Italian at school.

SB: She kept this one quiet.

TM: Do you know what it is? Because I don't have anyone Italian around me, it's difficult, so when I go back to Italy, I pick it back up again and then I come back and it's…yeah.

RL: I love that I've learnt this about you. Sunayana, were you already familiar with June Jordan's work and/or Safia's?

SB: June's work, yes. The first poem of hers I read was quite a short one. I think it's called Intifada Incantation and I remember seeing it on the page and the whole poem's in capital letters. At the time, I thought 'this could be a printing thing'. As I read more of her work, I came to know it was very much June's style. The tone just comes through and the poem is so powerful. It ends with: 'I think I look at myself in the mountains of the sun' and the first line is something like: 'I said I loved you and I wanted genocide to stop.'

Those two lines land with these block-capital letters, you can't ignore her. So I think I was drawn to her from the very beginning because she's so outspoken and so loud and so wise. A close friend of mine told me about another one of her poems, which was Poem About My Rights, a very long poem, a good four page, you can really get into it, I was so in my feelings

by the end of it. It embodies so much anger, so much defiance, I think I'm very well trained to try to understand what anger means and she was a really good place to start understanding it.

Safia was a completely new find. I knew of her name and I knew that she was very good, but you know how you have a sort of roster of poets on standby that you intend to read? This kind of pushed her in front of me and the next day, I'm crying, like 'Oh my God, what was I doing without this?' Why do the lines of her poems seem like they were in my head before I'd even read them? Why, why?

RL: You felt this too, Tania?

TN: Definitely. It feels very familiar, like 'I've been thinking this, but thanks for putting it down on paper'.

SB: Very, very powerful just to hear her talk about languages, about alienation. There's a lot of pain as well in her work that I had never experienced, specifically the pain of war, the pain of recovering so closely from British occupation. Her title pays homage to this.

RL: The title, The January Children. You mentioned why that is in that poem, the fact that she is from a people that were assigned the birth dates of January 1st by the coloniser. There's this thing about colonisation, obviously I know that's horrific, obviously nothing more can surprise me. But each time I'm, like, "no way!"

SB: It just goes from being horrific and malicious to just banal. Complete tasteless and yet the repercussions last for years. This is very much generational now and very much in Safia's work. There's a lot of angst and it feels very, very sincere, reading how she reflects on what it means to be home but never, ever going there. She says something 'I'm from two countries, both of them are broken'.

RL: Tania, what's the difference for you between reading and writing knowing you had the commission for this project? How does it affect the way you read?

TN: I read first, deliberately not underlining things, trying my hardest not to underline things, then going back over it again, so most of the time, it's a line that strikes me or something like 'I've thought this before', things that feel familiar to me and then I just underline them and then I try to work that. Or it's the title. If the title's cool, I will write a response to that in that way, either speaking direct to the title or directly to the line I've picked out, or try and incorporate those lines within the piece. It was just a process of doing a number of those things. I ended up doing it by the theme, themes of certain poems.

RL: Which theme in particular?

TN: With June's work, it was about not being seen from Who See Me? With Safia's work, it was language and the feeling of not fully grasping one language and knowing the other so well.

RL: Did you identify any common themes between June and Safia's work?

TN: Yeah, I think both of them talk a lot about displacement. There's a feeling of displacement in both of their work and wanting to be seen and also, not just wanting to be seen, like firmly having the foot in the place, saying 'I'm here', so there was a lot of that, especially with June's work.

RL: Maybe we're doing the wrong thing by looking for similar themes? Was anything starkly different?

TN: With Safia's, I thought her work was more tender. There was a tenderness to her writing, although a lot of the subjects were harrowing or whatever, there was a softness to it, whereas with June, especially with her use of capitalisation, very shouty, like she's there in your face. June uses a lot of capital letters, Safia doesn't, everything's lower case.

RL: Everything's lower case, that's really interesting. Maybe just the titles? No, the titles are not capitalised. That makes it feel softer to you?

SB: Yes, almost like she's whispering something.

RL: Sunayana, how did you find the reading task, knowing the reading was for something, rather than just pure enjoyment?

SB: It's always fun when you have new poets to read. You always think of it like: 'This is great, I love that I can do this', and then you have to get to the task to write it and then it's not so fun. You weigh yourself up against these two amazing poets and think: 'How am I going to distil both of them into something that adequately responds to them both?' It was a huge challenge and I wouldn't have asked for any other two poets to do this with.

I noticed the capitalisation in June's poems and the complete lack of capitalisation in Safia's is such an interesting stark difference to have. Also, I felt there's a lot of resignation in Safia's poems, a lot of questioning in June's. June is very defiant in the sense she's like 'Why is it like this? Why is it that if I want to do this, I have to consent to this being the case? Why am I seen this wa y when I walk down the street?' With Safia, it feels like a very dull ache, like a longing right in the stomach. It's far less like she's questioning, more that she's just trying to make sense of it.

RL: I feel there's something that traces the lineage, often the female lineage, so it's her mother and her grandmothers, her aunties. There is a mention of her brother, whereas June's even throughout all of these collected poems, Directed By Desire, I feel like June opens her arms outwards to the world, whereas Safia is looking up a family tree to try and make sense of things that way.

Tania, you said you underlined things, you're drawn to titles, you maybe think about a line or a phrase going into the poem that you're then going to write in response. Sunayana, how about you? How does that process actually play out for you?

SB: I was picking out certain words that I thought were repeating. There's a lot of words that repeat in Safia's poems. She likes to bring up this image of the gap in the teeth a lot, which I think is a really beautiful image, but also quite a tense one. There's something fragile about looking at a gap in someone's teeth. So I wrote that down. I wrote down some more of her images. She writes about the moon in some of the poems, she writes about blood, and in June's it was more 'How do I write myself more actively and not more like I'm a passive subject who's had things happen to her?'

I was trying to underline certain phrases. I chopped a few lines from her poems and just put them with a few lines of Safia's and tried to see what they made. Eventually, it just came down to starting with trying to put both their voices together, so how do I put Safia's introspection with June's defiance? That process. I had to go back to it a lot and remember what I was responding to, because it's very easy to drift off from the poets themselves into your own voice, so I had to keep coming back and thinking 'Wait, hold on, am I actually doing this justice? Am I doing this the right way or am I just using them as a proxy to fall back into my own typical images and stuff.

RL: I don't know there's anything typical about your stuff. I've been excited and looking forward to hearing these for a very long time. Then we can talk about what you found most difficult, without it sounding like a disclaimer, because we're all sick of that 'It's not my best'. Then we can talk about the things you found most rewarding and might have found most difficult. Tania, would you like to read your poem please?

TN: Yes. I'm terrible with titles, so this one is currently untitled. The title I came with is See Me, See Tongue. So this piece is called;

<u>see me, see tongue</u>

on narrow pavements meant to be shared
i wonder if white people are magicians
i stare in amazement
wait in anticipation
as they walk towards me
their arms linked
about to perform the impossible
my favourite magic trick
'walking through the black girl standing in the way'
i'm yet to see this trick in its entirety
i'm dissatisfied when they barge me
when i have to force space between them with my shoulders
and continue existing on the other side.
ta-da.

your bed asks if i want to mould this memory in the foam
i think about how we look from above

who see us?
brown, smooth, folded,
and decide this pretzel imprint will do
tangled like headphone wires
maybe that's why you can't hear me.

i'm glowing from somewhere.
my waist beads have started to roll upwards,
under my breast like a second bra strap,
breasts which usually rest comfortably in your mouth,
like my name, like the letter O
lower your jaw
you say i feel more full moon than crescent
i weep blue, you bring me closer to the pain
with each light lick, each suck
you fill your mouth with new words
baby and belly and time.

Dad tells me to pound the okra, sometimes he says *okro*
sometimes mum says *trafficate* instead of indicate and i get confused
sometimes i linger on *irregardless* or *regardless*
lap or *laps*
plantain or *plantin* - depending
sometimes i can't find the right word,
the sentence dissipating in to awkward laughter.
language gives me anxiety, so does boiling rice
Dad is still waiting on the okra
i cut chunks in to the mortar, pound it with pestle,
it is mahogany, it is sculpted
it looks like something the British would find and keep
behind glass
keep from us.
i run my finger along the bottom
feel for ancient engraving,
a message from the ancestors
or manufacturers
if not language i will pass on taste
both the need the tongue
but I know when a soup needs more salt a sentence in my mouth will reach the tip
and I still couldn't tell you what's missing.

SB: That was beautiful.

RL: The way that moves!

TN: Thanks.

RL: Sunayana.

SB: **Self-Portrait with White Cliffs**

In the grey of Sundays by the sea
I shop for groceries wearing tight black
trousers that strain across the breadth of my thighs

I hear a fork tongue hiss behind me
coming to chain my legs

speaking with the hybrid
of disgust and delight
I have understood well

At home I wash the serpentine venom out of my clothes.

I swing my clean hair in front of the mirror until it
falls over my face like a soft lashing.
You look like the girl from the horror movie.

You swing its thick branches because it feels like a small freedom

One night, a boy with irrepressible body heat
kisses your thighs until they blister

The next day you walk like you are in song

You take yourself up the white cliffs where you feel the wind pushing you off like you are soap along a porcelain tub. You carefully retreat

and call your mother

The wind is a man tugging at your dress

You realise you love a boy who becomes a fascist after dark

You give up resisting the appetite of a werewolf

when you catch sight of the moon

You fill your plates to capacity
and eat until the only 'no' comes from you.

Diving to pick up the little girl of yourself who slipped over the edge of the cliff
You cup her face and tell her men do not protect her anymore
She looks at you with eyes even bigger than your own.

You smudge the borders around your eyelids until they
look like two gravitational wells
You are all teeth, no longer hiding behind the soft invitation of lips.

RL: Wow, thank you. How did you both find that when you are given the challenge of a commission, do you feel your work is better for it? That you've submitted to a challenge and are not doing something you're comfortable with?

TN: I think for me, it's very easy to fall into a pattern. I have a way I'm very comfortable with, certain images that tend to come up a lot in my work, but then if I'm responding to someone else's, I might have a completely different way of writing, different images that are prevalent in the work. I then try to take that on, which obviously naturally changes it. It's always nice to see what I can then do. It's a million times' different from what I always fall back on. I enjoy it.

RL: Do you feel that after a commission, say after this, you've been distilling the voices of Safia Elhillo and June Jordan, do you feel your voice is then changed somewhat? Or do you feel you will go back into what you've already established as your own voice?

TN: I think it changes, but not in a major way. I might write something and then go back to a poem that I was reading around that time and be like: 'OK, that's where that came from', but whilst I'm writing, I'm not knowing that that's what's happening. So it's not like a major shift, I don't start writing sonnets all of a sudden.

SB: Tania sonnet writer?

TN: Like Shakespeare! But yeah, it's a very subtle change. Adding to the toolbox, essentially, as opposed to getting a whole new one.

RL: How can we as poets make sure that we are only adding to our voice, or seasoning our voice in different ways? Is there a danger, do you feel, that you can respond too hard, so your voice emulates too closely the one that you've been listening to or reading?

TN: If it was just like the one poem and your style is very similar, I don't think it's too bad. If you then take that on completely and that's your new thing, maybe that's where it's

a bit ‘hmm’. But maybe that might be your new thing. Who’s to say there’s anything wrong with completely adopting someone else’s?

SB: Like when you read someone you really like and you just say ‘that voice is me’.

TN: I don’t write now in the way I used to write three or four years ago. I’ve just been changing.

RL: Can’t you sometimes tell, in a workshop, or you hear ‘that’s a Warsan [Shire] poem’. It’s so obvious that person has been reading a certain poet. When does it stop becoming a response and become an imitation?

SB: I feel like borrowing language isn’t enough to write an original poem. You can tell, because the language feels like it belongs somewhere else, it doesn’t necessarily fit this poem or this experience. I do think a lot of poetry is un-cited plagiarism, but at the same time, it’s not necessarily a bad thing, because there’s a lot of overlap and that’s not to say that nobody’s idea is their own. It depends how you take that to the page and that’s why we love certain poets, because they haven’t written images in a way we’ve ever seen before.

We’re just ‘wow, I’d never have thought of that’. That’s you. No one can take that from you. That’s how you can tell the difference between someone who’s toeing too close to the line. I think people do funny things to find their voice as well. People do the whole imitation thing somewhere down the line to fit in, because people are trying to get into some kind of canon, but then it takes a lot of courage to bring yourself back out and say ‘hold up, why am I in this? Am I in this just to be treated as one like everyone else or do I want to do something else?’

RL: I do think it lies in where you said, Sunayana, in making it new. If I tried to imitate either of your voices, even if it was just the way you just said that and I repeated it, it’s going to be something that’s different because I will have certain inflections. That’s what I think is important. Just reading widely, because then if you’re casting the net super-wide, it’s not like you’ve just read one poet.

SB: This is the thing, because if this commission was just to respond to one poem, it might have been easier to fall into those traps, but because you gave us Safia and you gave us June, it’s all right, I have to give my voice, I have to bring them in together, which is why I love Tania’s poem so much. I feel like it brought them both in so well, but it still sounded like a Tania poem, not like anyone else’s.

RL: Will you talk us through your poem in the sense of where the influence might come in and where you felt you had to go your own way, for example the ‘trafficate’ line for me, it’s funny but then you also talk about the discomfort of laughing about the way somebody else uses the language that perhaps is not theirs or their only one.

TN: For the first stanza, that was very much June.

RL: Remind us how that starts again, Tania.

TN: ‘On narrow pavements meant to be shared, I wonder if white people are magicians. Stare in amazement, wait in anticipation as they walk towards me, their arms linked, about to perform the impossible. My favourite magic trick, walking through the black girl standing in the way.’ So when I was reading Who Sees Me, it was very much about gaze. Who’s looking at you? Who wants to be seen?

I think for me, because I live in Watford, for anyone who knows where Watford is, or what Watford is, it’s a very white area. I didn’t grow up there, I grew up in London, so moving out, there were certain things I wasn’t used to, so I felt like I was very much invisible. People would walk into me, which was something that had never happened to me before. I used to think it was just in my head until I started talking to other people who lived outside of London, other black people, and then I realised it’s a thing.

RL: That’s interesting. So not being singled out for being one of the only black people there, but actually just not existing.

TN: I felt that some of the time, I actually had to assert my existence and just say: ‘I’m here’. There’s this unwritten rule when you’re getting on the bus in Watford. There’s a hierarchy. So first, you’re aware of who’s been waiting at the bus stop before you, then it’s elderly people, so you let elderly people on first, then men are supposed to let women on first, etc etc. So I find, for example, if I’m at the bus stop and it’s just myself and a white man, he will get on the bus, not offer me the opportunity to get on first.

If it was myself, a white man and a white woman, they would offer the white woman to get on first. He’ll still get on before me. So again I used to think ‘Is this just me?’ When you add these things together, it’s like, OK. It’s not something conscious, I’m not deliberately going to ignore this black woman standing here, but…

RL: It’s worse if it’s not conscious. Whether it’s conscious or not conscious, it’s horrendous. Sometimes, I don’t know whether I’m offended if any man opens the door for me anymore. It comes from chivalry, which is super-sexist, so I can’t be a woman and be like ‘I love having dinner paid for’ and ‘I love having doors opened for me’. It is quite a hard one. It’s really interesting that you have noticed that. What do you do with that problem? Write poems about it? Where does it go?

TN: Just channel it. Sometimes I’m vocal about it, sometimes I’m like ‘I was here first’, other times I just can’t be bothered. So it’s about picking and choosing. That in itself can be exhausting.

RL: Not being noticed can be exhausting?

TN: No, just choosing. Choosing when to say ‘I’m here’ and when to let it go.

RL: How is not being seen exhausting? Some people might think you get loads of peace and quiet.

TN: Because I'm here, simply. I'm here. There's a reason why I'm not being seen and that shouldn't be the case.

SB: It's not for Tania's peace and quiet.

TN: Exactly. You're not doing it to make me feel good. Because I acknowledge those reasons, I'm like 'nah'.

RL: You know when they do these polls and they ask what would you like your superpower to be and 'being invisible' is right in the top three? I really don't think people know what they're wishing for.

TN: I think like I was saying to Sunayana earlier on, one thing I do like about living in Watford is that I'm almost anonymous. I don't know that many people in Watford. So there's a difference between being anonymous and not being seen. I like being anonymous, not having people know be and just being able to get on with my life, but it's different when you're taking up all the space on the pavement and you expect me to get onto the road. That's where I have a problem.

RL: Where does Safia come into the work? Or did you stop thinking 'that's Safia's voice, that's June's voice'? When you started mixing it, did you not know where the milk or the sugar was, it just became one?

TN: I think Safia came towards the end, because when I read her work, it's something I feel like I wrote, because I always have these conflicts with language and place and home. All of these things. So talking about okra, like my mum saying 'trafficate' instead of 'indicate'. For a long time, I thought trafficate was a word, until I started taking lessons and was like 'let me trafficate' and my driving instructor was like…

Yeah, there's just this interesting thing, I'm always interested in language and there's this interesting thing about what is familiar to you and what is seen to be correct and what isn't and who says it's right and who says it isn't. The fact that language is always evolving, but there's still 'that's wrong' and 'that's right', like 'plantain' and 'plantain', when are we ever going to settle it? That's where Safia came in.

RL: What I loved about your poem was the way it did move, so I'm drawing a long squiggle in the air, but I felt that's the shape it made in my head. It did lots of things but without being separated, but you didn't use numbers, but it did feel separate and move in lots of places but then still had a journey, if not a spiralling journey, how it touched on, for me, lots of different aspects of who you are.

TN: Thanks.

RL: It's all right, Tania. It's stunning. Sunayana, tell us about yours. How did you filter the voices in? Can you still tell where something's an influence from June Jordan or an influence from Safia Elhillo?

SB: I think in mine, it mostly came through in the vocabulary and also, possibly, a bit of the voice. For example, I think June talks a lot about encounters with men and a lot of them aren't nice at all, they're horrible, and she talks about it in some of her poems. A Case Study is about assault and she has such authority when she talks about those things that happened to her. So I was trying to think how could I apply that in what I was writing and how I feel my body is, in the way we were talking about being invisible and hyper-visible at the same time.

Like looking the way that I do opens me up to comments from men that I don't want, that aren't invited, and how can I reclaim some kind of authority in that interaction? Sometimes, it's just writing men like snakes or describing them as having forked tongues, for example, just to put it into perspective. I think also just the images of the moon, and you give up the appetite of resisting a werewolf when you catch sight of the moon. You are all teeth.

Things like that, they struck me as integrally Safia things. Not because she just picks a random word because that sounded poetic, but because they have deep resonances throughout the collection. I've found resonances in my work from that as well, so it seemed natural.

RL: And you still made them new. So what we were talking about earlier was how can you still have an influence. The moon is one of those things that sometimes in a workshop, especially with new writers, I'm like 'it's super-clichéd, do not go anywhere near the moon'. I don't want to hear about the moon, I don't want to hear about stars, mirrors, the sun, the ocean. Blood as well. Especially for women poets, because we've also got our own list of clichés, like don't bring mascara up, or smoke, or dresses, but when you're skilled enough, you realise those problems and therefore if you go anywhere near it, you know what you're approaching, so maybe you've put that demand on yourself, that what you're going to have to come up with is something new and I definitely think you achieved that, Sunayana.

Also I was blown away when reading Safia, there are quite a lot of references to blood, but there's a particular poem, I can't remember exactly which one it is, but she's lying on the floor, covered in gold and bleeding. Blood becomes something against her, or somebody's gold, naked body, how red that blood becomes. I'd never seen blood like that before she showed me it like that. I've seen blood as red as roses, but next to gold, dust, I think she was dusted in gold, I have never seen anything that red in my head before.

Did you both feel a pressure in responding to the chosen poets? June Jordan, who I opened this show by saying, is regarded as one of the great mothers of literature? 'Black literature'. Yeah. Definitely, 27 volumes is no mean feat. Also, how did you feel responding to a super-successful peer? Safia is the same age as us, or roundabout. We might be going for the same competitions. You mention the African Poetry Prize at the beginning. What were your feelings about responding to these two poets in particular? Did you feel a pressure?

TN/SB: Yeah.

RL: What kind of pressure? Were you more intimidated by June or Safia or both?

TN: Both, honestly. Safia writes so amazingly and June…you want to make sure you're doing the work justice and doing your own work justice at the same time. Again, it has a lot to do with taking something from both of theirs and incorporating it into your own and making sure it's still your own. I wouldn't want it to be a poor imitation of a June Jordan poem or a poor imitation of a Safia poem, so there was a lot of pressure with that. It was a challenge.

RL: Sunayana?

SB: Yeah, I completely agree. It was very difficult trying to write something that would stand out amongst these two. I think everything I could write has already been edited, refined, is more intense and concentrated in their collections. What am I going to do? You have to start from somewhere. Safia would may well have had June as an influence. June as well, the further back you go, the harder it is to think who did you have? You really were just writing blank?

Maybe that's why they are so honest and so defiant in the original sense, when you read poets like June Jordan and Gwendolyn Brooks for example, the real literary foremothers of ours. So yeah, a lot of pressure knowing where these poets come from, but at the same time, it's good. I wouldn't want to respond to anyone else at the same time.

RL: You wouldn't want to lower the standard. Like 'I feel totally fine responding to their poem because I don't even like it'. You said 'a foremother of ours', Sunayana, do you feel as women of colour poets, that you are excluded from the canon or even the term 'the canon'? You're both nodding. You do feel excluded? When everyone talks about the canon, you're like 'that ain't for me'?

TN/SB: Yeah.

RL: Do you feel there's an importance that we create our own canon? Or do you feel we should be using that energy to curate and promote your own canon? To challenge the existing Canon so June is not then on the Poetry Foundation website as 'one of the greatest African-American poets of all time'? Should we be campaigning for that to be taken out so we're not talking about women poets as women poets and men poets just get to be poets? Black poets have that prefix to their claim to be poets. Where do you feel we should put our energy? In creating our own or challenging the existing one?

TN: Honestly, that's something I think about all the time, not just in regard to poetry, just like everything else, like music, culture, history, everything. I don't know if there's an answer, they're both valid in their own right. It's very important to have our own canon, but I also feel like it shouldn't just be a canon for us. I feel our writers, black writers, deserve to be read by everyone else and if that means fighting for it to be part of the mainstream canon, then it definitely should be.

RL: What would you say is the importance of anyone reading June Jordan?

TN: June Jordan's experiences are very particular and unique to June Jordan and I feel within the Canon that we have now, that when I was at uni, there wasn't one black poet we read in our poetry module. A whole year. I feel like if I'd had a June Jordan poem, a single poem, not even a whole collection, that would have changed my approach to poetry at that time. I think some people aren't even exposed to that history of where she's coming from and I think that's important.

The thing about literature is it's historical. It allows you to understand what was happening in a particular time, as well as being something that gives you pleasure. There's not enough of African literature, African poets, African-American poets, black poets generally, in our canons.

RL: So your thing is with both.

TN: Yeah, it's difficult to say you should just focus energy on one. Simultaneously would be good.

RL: It's a trick one. Sunayana, what do you think?

SB: I completely agree with everything Tania said again. This is my standard response to everything. It's too much wisdom. I'm just thinking that when you change one, you'll probably inevitably start to change the other, right? Once you've started to rewrite the canon, the poems that weren't in the canon in the first place will start to be considered more, recognised, I don't know what the timeframe is for that. As far as the merits go, for anyone reading June Jordan's poems, it's just to have a more informed experience of other lives.

I feel like we grew up having to empathise with so many narratives that just weren't for us, that we had to fit ourselves into men discovering themselves on the road somewhere, and I had to do that. It was just like a necessary thing and you had to just try and get some emotional experience. I don't see a student on the other side being like 'I need to read this poem about civil rights' because it doesn't apply. Why on earth do you have that? It can't be!

You think this happened in a vacuum? This poem would not have been written if it wasn't for how you politically relate to the other. You have to read other poems. I think it's way more responsibility on us, kind of 'oh, I'm widely read, I can read Jack Kerouac, I can also read this other poet'. I just think no, it's a responsibility actually, I don't think you can really know your craft well enough and I don't think you can produce well from your craft if you haven't read enough. If you're very honed in by your own limited experience.

RL: Pretty much for me, everything in the existing Canon is all the same work, just one man. There are obviously some real greats in there, but some are only in there on the merit of being written by a white man. When someone says they're well-read, what they mean is they can tick off maybe 100 books off the Canon. I'm definitely with you. We need to cast the net wider, because otherwise, how are you ever going to write anything different? How are you ever really going to challenge your thoughts and then you're writing?

SB: It's the people who haven't even read those poets that still continue to be judges on poetry panels, that still continue to constitute the metric for good poetry. I think that's not fair. Why do you get to constitute, why do you get to decide what good poetry is, when you haven't read poems that sound even remotely dissimilar to anything you could have written?

RL: Yeah, and also as I said in the introduction, also changing the language about how we talk about how the work is finally discovered, as if it's been hiding. Hidden, hiding, quite different. But when it is actually discovered, how the language about how we talk about those works. For a lot of people and for us at Octavia, it's the way you get off the stage and people are: 'Oh, it was so … insert something super-offensive that's supposed to be in praise of your work. Even in The Independent the other day, they sent another white journalist to go to a grime concert, did you read the Stormzy in The Independent?

I think he's got the memo that you can't say anything bad. That's also problematic because then you're not being judged on the same… So he got that memo from somebody, but even in what he felt was praise was super-offensive. It was 'raw'. If I hear one more person telling somebody of colour that their work is 'raw', you might as well say it's barbaric or have a bone through its nose. You may as well say all these things because that's how offensive it is. 'I just loved it, it was just so… raw'.

Who told you that was OK to say? We have to change the language. Also not to appropriate those experiences, like you were saying as well, because otherwise you read…

SB: Not inserting yourself into those experiences again.

RL: Yeah, the way in which we respond. So when I was reading Directed By Desire, 'The Bible' by June Jordan, I got thinking about, she left 27 volumes of work. Did reading both poets make you think about your own poetic legacy?

TN: Yeah, I think even before we were assigned this task, I've been thinking about what I want to leave as of now. I've just been performing. I mean, I've had one or two things published in some magazines, but I don't have a complete body of work for someone to say 'I want to read a collection of Tania's poems'. Before I was very indifferent to that idea and I didn't feel it was what you needed to validate yourself as a poet. I still don't think that's true, but for me, it's part of my legacy, part of what I want to leave for people who come after me, who want to read my experience. My experience is completely different to Sunayana's, to yours.

RL: But we're all the same, we write exactly the same!

TN: That's what you think! So someone might want to read some poems about a girl who's Nigerian and who moved to Watford out of an estate in South Kilburn, who writes poems and dances and acts and loves hard and sometimes doesn't love at all. Somebody might want to read that one day in 10, 20 years from now.

SB: Or right now.

TN: Yeah, so I thought for selfish reasons definitely and also selfless reasons, because I would have loved to have read poets who I'm in the same room with when I was younger and I didn't have access to that, so I feel like now being in the position I'm in, we're in now, I think it's important to not let that go.

SB: It's really difficult for me because I think the voice changes so much as I grow that the prospect of making a collection seems more like something to do with chronology than something that I would consider timeless. I worry sometimes that what if poetry isn't timeless? Then I read things like this and I think, particularly in June's case, I think this is really applicable. I had to look up when she was writing when I read some of her poems, because they had so much of the same themes. In a way it's a testament to how little progress has happened but at the same time, so much of it did strike me as timeless, so I think that would be a legacy I would want.

To isolate the part of my work that would be timeless, but again, also, not to be so restricted by the idea that I have to be amazing, that I'd have to work twice as hard to get a collection than someone else, but just to say I'm here, I'm like a poet, but also I do astrophysics and just trying to harmonise them both in some way and yeah, this is what I came up with, this is how my brain works. Just to have that down somewhere is validating for you as well, just to see part of you make it onto the page. That's probably far away in the future.

RL: No. Thank you both. It has been an absolute pleasure as I knew it would be, just really beautiful to be in a room and talk to you about what we love and who we love. So thank you very much to David of Lunar Poetry Podcasts for inviting us, Octavia, to create our own show. Thank you to our literary godmother, June Jordan and to the incredible Safia Elhillo. Thank you to the Barbican. Today we're using their space and shout out to Barbican Young Poets and also to the Arts Council, who have made this possible.

There will be a transcript of this show available at www.lunarpoetrypodcasts.com. You can follow Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and you can download this from wherever you usually download your podcasts from. Thank you very much, it's been an absolute pleasure.

TN/SB: Thank you. Thanks, David.

End of transcript.