

COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE # 50

Guest(s): Yanyi, Judah Zucker Goren, Josh Goren, Christine Larusso, Nicholas Fuenzalida, Daniel Schiffman

Host(s): Rachel Zucker

Transcript by: Leigh Sugar

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[Microphone feedback]

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Check one, check one. Working. Like this?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you want to hear it with the, uh, headphones? Do you want to see what it feels like?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Hello.

Whoa!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you like that?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah, I do.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's funny that I can't hear through the headphones.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Mm hmm.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Alright, so do you want to introduce the podcast, this episode?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: What episode is it?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Fifty.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: And with who?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, remember that's the thing.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Oh, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: But I don't know what to say!

RACHEL ZUCKER: You could say, Hello, and welcome to episode 50 of Commonplace Conversations with Poets and Other People.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: [whispers] One second. I like hearing it with the headphones

RACHEL ZUCKER: Take your time.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Welcome to Episode 50 of Commonplace, Conversations with Poets and Other People. This episode features poet, teacher, and podcast host, Rachel Zucker. And she's my mom [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Alright, what question do you have for me?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Um, when you sit down, and you want to write, well, first of all, do you sit down and do you say, I want to write a poem, and start writing?

RACHEL ZUCKER: No.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Or does something come to you and then you sit down?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, first of all, it's not the same every time, I don't have like a big system that I stick to, but that's a really good question. Um, I would say most of the time, what happens is I'm at a reading or I'm on the bus or I'm with you, or I'm, I'm doing something else, definitely not sitting at my desk writing a poem, and I hear a piece of language or a word that's used in a way that I, that it's maybe it's misused or something, and, um, it sort of, it interests me, and it sticks in my head, or maybe I wake up early in the morning and I have like a, a thought of something I want to write about or usually a line of a poem, and so I try to hold on to it and I like repeat it in my mind a few times to, uh, almost like memorize it. And then if I, sometimes I'll write it down in a notebook, um, if I have, or a piece of paper, if I have one with me. Or later, I'll go to write the poem, and then I'll start with that piece. But it's almost never that I'm like, you know what, I should write a poem today. And I sit down and it's quiet and I start writing something.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: That's interesting. And when do you decide, because obviously you have to at some point sit down and start writing the poem. So at what point do you decide that you're going to sit down and write it?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I haven't written a lot of poems recently, um, but I think the process has been kind of the same for a really long time. So a lot of times I'll start writing when I'm supposed to be doing something else. Like either if I'm in a reading, like listening to other people at a public reading, reading their poems, I'll write, I'll start writing then and then I'll go home and finish. Or sometimes I write if I can't sleep, um, in the middle of the night, or sometimes, um, I'm not teaching right this, this semester, but, um, I sometimes have free writing in the beginning of class for my students and I'll write then, um, or if I'm supposed to be writing, uh,

reading other people's poems, like often if I sit down to read a book, I will write then

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: So, and also another one, okay. Do you consider yourself more a podcast host, a writer or a teacher?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you consider me more a podcast host, a writer, or a teacher?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: I think a writer?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: But if someone asked me what your job was, I might, there's a chance I would say teacher.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: But I wouldn't say, I would say, oh, and she has a podcast or, I usually wouldn't say podcast host.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think telling people you're a teacher is the easiest thing to explain. Like, oh, my mom is a teacher. Like people understand that. Whereas if you say, have you ever told someone my mom is a poet?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah. And what's their response? Like, that's not a job?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: No, no one ever says that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, that's awfully nice.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: That's that's interesting or that's...

[5:00]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, it's interesting because you said writer first, even though you you've seen me doing the podcast, you've never seen me teach, I don't think, and you don't see me write?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: And I haven't read your books.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, you hear me talk a lot about both writing and teaching.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah, but you also talk about the podcast.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I do, I do.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: What's the main purpose of the podcast?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh god, right to the heart of the matter you go [laughs]. Um, it was the, uh, does that mean I have to pick one?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah, or two, but not more.

RACHEL ZUCKER: To try something new. To make a community.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Okay. I just, but trying something new is not a good one, cause that's just-

RACHEL ZUCKER: But that was the main one!

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah, but I don't understand that one because you could do anything. Why podcasts, of anything?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, okay. So to make a community, or maybe another way to say that would be to have contact with other people face to face.

Okay, that's one. That's the podcast

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Otherpoets? Poets and other people? [Laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. Yeah, but not just poets, also the listeners. Okay. So that's that I guess is number one. And why did, if I wanted to try something new why did I pick a podcast?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Because I love podcasts and because I thought I could make one. Any other questions?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Um... no.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Is there anything that you feel like listeners should know about me, in order to like, trust me as the host of this podcast or uh, you know, like, what would help, what do they need to know, if anything?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: What, what don't they know that I do know?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I don't know. What do you know?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: A lot!

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. Um, do you think I have, I have a bias that you should know, that you should reveal? Or do you feel like I have any habits as a listener or as a speaker?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Uh, bias towards who? Hmmm....

RACHEL ZUCKER: Like, is there something I'm always interested in?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: You're interested in, um, you tend to be interested in things that are, like, very abstract.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Uh huh.

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Or something that's, like, amazingly not abstract.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can you give an example?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Like, well, it can kind of work for any form of art, so even just in this room, there's stuff like that, which is very abstract, that, that painting, and no, really, doesn't have a, uh, image in it that's clear. I like it a lot, too. And then you also like things like, you also really like photography, which is almost always has, you know, like an image, you know.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, can you do one more favor? Um, can you say, uh, like, can you give my, a little bio for me?

JUDAH ZUCKER GOREN: Rachel Zucker is the author of nine books, the host of Commonplace Podcast, and also a teacher at NYU. And she she hasn't yet, wait. Can I start over?

Rachel Zucker is the author of nine books, and, wait, uh, no, I got it.

Rachel Zucker is the author of nine books, the host of Commonplace Podcast, and also a teacher of poetry at NYU. Right now, she's working on her newest book, *The Poetics of Wrongness*, uh, and her most recent book is, um, *Pedestrian* and *Mothers*. Thanks for listening.

[9:24]

CHRISTINE LARUSSO: Hi everyone, this is Christine LaRusso, one of the producers of Commonplace. I'm a poet, and I just finished a residency at Lake Forest College, where I worked on a manuscript that I hope will become my first book. Rachel was my teacher at Fordham where I did my undergraduate degree, and a few years later at NYU, where I got my MFA.

For our 50th episode, we wanted to give listeners a glimpse into the makings of Commonplace, and especially into the background and motivations of your host, Rachel. Although every episode is unique, Rachel envisioned Commonplace as an experiment in conversation, as a form of literary and aesthetic investigation, community building, and connection. So Rachel wanted to reveal more about

herself, her work, her personal life, the history of Commonplace and the pleasures and challenges of making this podcast through conversation.

You just heard from her youngest son, Judah. You're about to hear a conversation between Rachel and poet and critic, Yanyi. Yanyi chose Rachel to be his mentor as a part of his Margins fellowship with the Asian American Writers Workshop. Later in the episode, you'll hear a very brief excerpt from a long conversation Rachel recorded with her husband, Joshua Goren, and then a follow up call that Rachel recorded with Yanyi. In this next segment, Rachel and Yanyi talk about what it's like hosting the podcast, teaching, gender, listening, mental health, privilege, and much more. Their follow up conversation offers you a bit more context about their relationship and dives deeper into issues around identity and writing.

In 2018, Yanyi won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, awarded by Carl Phillips, for his first book, *The Year of Blue Water*. He is currently a 2017-2018 Asian American Writers Workshop Margins Fellow, and Associate Editor at Foundry. He will be attending NYU as a Poetry MFA student beginning next fall. Here are Rachel, and Yanyi.

[11:25]

YANYI: After you asked me, first of all, I was like, really excited to do it, and when I'm excited, because I'm a Virgo rising, I like, totally am like, alright, the complete edition, I'm gonna read all of the things. But then I read all these things, and then I was like, oh, I just wanna have a conversation, like, I have like, all these questions written out on my phone, and like...

RACHEL ZUCKER: I thought you were gonna say I read all these things and I just had one question, and it was, why did you write so many things? [Laughs]

YANYI: I think that's a really good question, well, like what for partially for the reason that like I feel like a lot of your work is about writing all the things, isn't it? So like it's a good question for you in particular. And that wasn't even the question that I wanted to start out with [laughs]. Well, something that I was kind of

wondering was like, we do have a relationship outside of the show. And should we talk about that as a way to frame the conversation of who we are to each other?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Sure.

YANYI: So, um, I'm Yanyi and I am an Asian American Writers Workshop Fellow. And I asked for you to be my mentor for, um, my fellowship year. And that was its own adventure because you had some questions about possibly doing that. Um, but so far the, the journey, as they say, in reality TV, um, has been fantastic. And I'm really honored to be here to talk to you about your work. And I'm so excited that it exists in the world and how it's going to give other people permission to do what you've been doing.

I think it's, uh, like the first question that I wanted to start out with was, why did you start Commonplace? Like, what, what was it that, uh, you felt was missing in the podcast space or in the space of, like, the um, the US poetry community at large, um, or the English speaking poetry community at large, um, that you wanted to create in the show? And um, it made me think about, as I was formulating this question, I was thinking about like, I don't remember how I discovered Commonplace and I don't remember if it had been before or after I saw you at Sarah Lawrence last year. But I really immediately was like, yes, this is exactly what I want to be listening to right now. Um, previously I had just been like reading a bunch of like Paris Review interviews. Like, um, I have this thing where I'm like really into Susan Sontag. Like it's been more than a while now, but uh, like I basically just Google YouTube for interviews with her when I'm like, cleaning the house and, or like doing, doing something in my life, and that's because I'm thirsty for, uh, conversations around aesthetics and about like what art we should be making in our present moment, um, and, and what needs to happen. So I was excited to, um, here Commonplace because I had been following like Poetry Foundation and Bookworm and all those other podcasts that are out there. Um, but yeah, I just really liked the questions that you're asking.

[14:57]

I think you're engaged with questions around, uh, race, gender, sexuality, uh, and trying to be accountable about things, uh, about those things when you, uh, see them and recognize them. Um, so, yeah, that's what made me continue listening. Because oftentimes you can start listening to something, get really excited about it, and then it's kind of just like, oh, well, this is just another, another conversation that's within the canon, um, the canon, capital T to capital C.

Um, so what's your take on why you started Commonplace?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, so I have like a lot of different answers to that.

YANYI: Love it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs]. And one was, um, I had just finished, um, this series of lectures that I was giving through the Bagley Wright Lecture Series. And that was an incredible experience for me. And it wasn't the very end, but I had a break from April until the following November, which was a long time. Um, and, the experience of doing the lectures was very profound, um, very gratifying, very disruptive, and it was difficult to end them or even to take a break. Um, and so, and I've told some of these things in pieces on the podcast before, and, at almost each location that I went to, um, I ended up, first of all, like, really valuing the Q& A at the end of the, of the lecture, like, that was my favorite part to hear, uh, what people wanted to know or comments that they had, but also, that kind of attention, it was, it was the enlightenment of the actual questions, but also just like, it blew me away that, that there was a room full of people, even if it was a small room, um, who had just sat there and listened to me talk for like 45 minutes and then wanted to stay and talk more.

And, and so I started to notice that like, I had really mixed feelings about giving lectures, but I had no mixed feelings about having a conversation about poetry. So that was one thing I noticed. And then there were the conversations around the lectures that I had while I was traveling. Not all, but many of them were with middle aged women, um, who were talking about like where they were in their lives. And everybody seemed to be having a similar set of midlife questions, um, and questions that were very much about poetry and that were very much not about

poetry, and the intersection between those two things or the way in which, you know, someone who maybe I didn't know very well, but then I was talking to them and then I found out like how they lived or their passions or their hobbies and then all of a sudden I was like, Oh, that is so fascinating. Now I understand your work in a different way or, and also, had the experience of presenting myself anew to every person. Um, and that was really fascinating.

Um, then each time I gave a lecture, I would come home and it was, it was difficult to come home. It was difficult to, uh, you know, walk in the door and be asked, like, where are my boots? And, you know, throw away the food that had gone bad. And, um, so, and, and to, and to deal myself with the ambivalence and the guilt of having been gone, having liked being gone, um, feeling that this was really important for me to do for myself and for my, for my family, for my husband and for my sons to see me doing this kind of work and enjoying it, but also that there was a cost, um, and to, to manage the feelings around that um, was really hard.

Um, so there was a real sense of loss for me that the lectures, even though the lectures were very stressful to write and and to some extent I was like, oh my god, this is just destroying my family and me, I also didn't want them to be over, and I felt like well I'll never be invited to go read anywhere or speak anywhere ever again, and i'm going to go back to being the mom who, you know, nobody listens to, and that was really sad.

So that so there was what there was a real hunger in my life a real sort of, you know, restless desire and and and feeling of like, not wanting to let that ambition be extinguished. Okay, so that's one thing.

YANYI: Love the ambition.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. Thank you. Okay. I was at the same time um doing this mentorship program, which is not... that's what it was called.

[20:09]

It's with um, a wise woman who I love very much who's been very important to me in my life. She's Peek a Trenkle. And it was very profound. And sometimes we'd go to her home and we'd garden. She was, it was very much built around the idea of being in nature, which is something that I have very little contact with and very little experience with. Um, so I was coming home on the bus from New Jersey -

YANYI: The origin story begins.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes, and it was towards the end of the mentorship program and I was really sad that it was going to be over. It's a, it's a nine month program, and I was listening to Marc Maron. And the reason I was listening to Marc Maron was because my oldest son, um, was really interested in Marc Maron. And I wanted to listen so that I knew what he was interested in, and then I could talk to him about it and, and I, um, I mean, the format of Commonplace is basically Mark Maron, but -

YANYI: I don't know who that is.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, you don't know, so, yeah, I don't know if I'm recommending it or not, but it's a it's a very, so he's a comedian and sort, sort of like at that point when he started the podcast like a failed comedian, which is interesting like, bookmark that.

Okay. Okay. So the other important background piece of information is that I really like podcasts.

YANYI: Right. So how many do you listen to a week?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, it depends on what else I'm doing. So, um, I, I go through stages where I have a manageable amount of anxiety and an almost unmanageable amount of anxiety. And, um, I both love living in New York and hate living in New York, and podcasts became really important for me, um, in terms of managing some of my anxiety, like on the subway or when I'm walking around. There's a way in which it like, uh, creates like a sphere of attention that helps me feel less overwhelmed by, um, the sounds of the city, the chaos of the

subway, um, and, and also provides a set, a feeling of like continuing narrative for me, so I really can't listen to music. Um, that's like super stressful for me.

I mean, I can't, there are some times I can listen to music, but music is, is, too emotional for me usually, and also then the song ends and I'm like, ah now I did it's a transition between one song and another is just too much, but if you're listening to like one episode of This American Life that gets you to work then you're at work, right?

YANYI: Right. And then you have to do the work thing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And then you have a bad work day Someone's not nice to you. You're like, well, but at least I'll find out how it ends, n the way home.

YANYI: Right.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So great.

YANYI: It's a way for you it sounds like it's a way for you to create a type of narrative in your life, you know like in the same way that maybe when I'm anxious I clean and listen to Susan Sontag interviews on YouTube, there's this really soothing aspect of hearing another person's voice but having them not necessarily be paying attention to you or needing anything from you, just like things are happening, and you're a part of it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Absolutely. And it's so intimate in my, in my feeling about it. it's like so intimate. Um, but you're not responsible. So, um, okay. So anyway, so, all right. So I listened to a lot of podcasts. So it was a form that I really, really loved. Yeah. Um, and both like the kind of more, I don't know what you think I'd know what the word is, but, um, both like the more, um, storytelling ones like This American Life or Invisibilia or, and then the interview ones.

More the storytelling ones or the narrative ones I tend to listen to but I was in this Marc Maron phase because of my son. So I'm listening to Marc Maron and I'm coming home from New Jersey and I've had this like amazing day where I think it

was the day where Peekalike asked us to set an intention, a private intention and then she gave us a job in the garden. And I think my, if I'm remembering right, but this might be the origin myth, um, my job was to clear the lavender patch, and I was really scared about knowing what was a weed and what was a flower, because I don't have any experience with this. And I, and I told Peekalike that and she was like, you're gonna figure it out, you're, it's going to be okay. And then just like notice that fear, like notice how worried you are about like pulling up a flower and not knowing what a weed looks like, and just like keep going keep going. And then it's true. Like I as soon as I, you know, maybe 10 minutes in I was like, oh, yeah Well, this is a weed and this is not a weed and then we can do it [laughs].

[25:14]

YANYI: Weed can do it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes. Um, so it was, and I and I don't remember what my intention was, but I think it was something like, How can I find my path? Um, you know, like what it, I had specifically not wanted to ask like a question of like, you know, should I keep teaching or find another career, or you know, what's gonna happen to my marriage? It was really more like, how can I find even what the right question is almost?

Okay, so all that stuff's going on and listen to Marc Maron again really frustrated. It's really crowded on the bus, there's traffic takes forever, and I was texting with my friend Dan Schiffman who teaches at ITP, and Dan is like a real booster of mine, like he's always like try it try it do it do it, like no matter what it is, and especially stuff, like he's, he is a maker, um, and uses technology to make things. And he like self published, um, his last book, which is a coding book. And whenever I would talk to him about poetry and publishing, he, he is like, this is the most antiquated way of going about like making things.

Um, so, I said to him, um, there's one more thread I'm going to bring up in a second. Um, but I said to him, like, I think I want to start a podcast. And Dan has a YouTube channel. Um, and it's like the most, uh, it's called Coding Train, and it's like the best YouTube channel of all time. I mean, I watch it sometimes, even

though I don't know anything about coding. Um, there's all these ways in which listening to him talk about coding helps me think about what I'm making, because I don't even understand what he's talking about. I mean, I actually could figure it out. And I know that. But it's just like watching something in another language. Okay I'm gonna answer i'm gonna finish this question because I can't believe I'm spending all this time answering this one question but it is a really good question for this purpose!

YANYI: Rachel. Your poetics is all about everything at the same time [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so the two last parts of this, the two last threads. All right, to question of why did I start Commonplace? Yeah um, I was writing about confessional poetry. I was teaching a class at NYU called the Legacy of the Confessional Impulse And I had talked to David Trinidad, um, who's a poet that I really love and I've been friends with for a long time, and he had a new book coming out. Um, my student, um, Andy Sanchez from NYU asked me to do an interview with David for Washington Square. Um, and I was really excited to do that. So, and I hadn't done an, uh, an interview really ever. I, I'd done a, I had done a very, very long, failed interview with Sharon Olds, which we can talk about or not, later.

YANYI: A failed interview? Is this in the archive somewhere?

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's never, yeah, it's never been published.

YANYI: Okay, I'm ready to talk about it. I need to write it down.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so, um, so David and I, I knew I didn't want to do, um, do it over email. And, but I'd heard that like doing it via chat, um, that some people liked that. And so we tried to do that and it just, it was just, it just did not work for us. And so David said to me, um, just call me on the phone. I can't, I can't like, I can't handle doing it this way. And so we ended up doing it over the phone and um, recording it and then Andy transcribed it. Um, and so I just had that experience and it was really exciting to talk to David and really fun to do that interview. And, um, and then, so all these things were, in my mind. All these things were happening.

The one last thing, uh, was, I think it was May... Oh, no, it was April, for sure was April because I knew I was flying out to Chicago to give my last interview at the end of April before the big break. And I was going to see David, um, who lives in Chicago and Dan Schiffman was like, just do it, just start it. And um, and so I was like, I don't know, I don't have the equipment, I don't know how to do it. He's like, just use your phone for now. And I spoke to Dan, and I spoke to my son Moses, um, cause who listens to so many podcasts, including Marc Maron. And I just came up like, I was like, I'm going to try it. And the only rule that both of them really urged me to try me to, to kind of, um, engage, was to do them face to face, not over the phone, as I had done with David.

[29:52]

So, I went out to Chicago, I used my iPhone, we were in my hotel room, and that was the first, um, ever, you know, Commonplace interview. Um, and then I really was like, Oh, these are not interviews. These are conversations. That was really important to me. And then the, the last piece, which is very personal as a little bit sad, but I'm going to admit it is that I wanted it to air on June 15th. Um, it was, that was my 19th anniversary. Except things weren't going well.

YANYI: Oh, got it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I felt, not that I wanted to supplant that day with a different anniversary, but I did feel... I wanted, I, I, first of all, I knew I would, it was, I knew, I would remember that day. Um, it seemed it was already an important day to me, but I also felt like maybe it would be good for me to put something into the world that was social and interactive and engaged and ambitious, and collaborative, and I think also one of the things that wasn't going well was feeling like nobody was that interested in me.

YANYI: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And so there was something I think that was both symbolic and literal about uh, it definitely in the in the first six months of the podcast and maybe still, you know less so, but but to some extent you know you get the pod

track numbers and then you can see at least how many people have downloaded, who knows how many people are actually listening, but I know from emails that somebody is, and um, and so there was this very weird way, and I didn't realize it until like, you know, several months in, in therapy where I was like, oh my god did I just start a podcast so somebody would say they were listening to me? Maybe!

YANYI: Possibly.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, but like I don't know why that's so different from why I write poetry

YANYI: Yeah, and also like I kind of wonder like, is it necessarily a, um, a bad thing for a woman or a femme to ask to be listened to and to make that happen?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right.

YANYI: Like, I love that you put a stake in the ground basically, and was like, I am interesting and people want to talk to me and I want to talk to other people. And this is proof that it happened. Um, but my sense is probably that it was, it's become a project that has become much bigger than that, right? It's been two years, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's been yeah, it's almost two years. It'll be two years in June. June 15th, right? Um, yeah, and I think that um, a question that Josh asked me early on, my husband, and this goes back to Mark Maron, um, he was really excited about the podcast, like really supportive, really like, you know, uh, liked it that I was doing something, um, that was, uh, kind of out there, but also like not poetry, um, even though it, it's mostly with poets, but it, it has, it's a different, it's a different accessibility. It's a different, um, kind of way of being in the world as a poet, and something that he could enjoy more than, he really likes poets, but he's not a poetry reader, and so he hasn't listened to the podcast for quite some time, but in the beginning he did. And so it was it was also a way of talking to him, right? You know through this other triangulated...

YANYI: You are not the only one who talks to loved ones through their work [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Um, but he asked me early on, like, well, how are you going to feel if you basically only ever get to be remembered or get to be known as theCommonplace person? Not as a poet in your own right? And you know because Marc Maron really was a failed comedian, and now he his his career is having like a renaissance and he's in a lot more stuff, he's a really good actor actually but for a long time he was just like, he was the podcast guy and, and I think Josh was worried that I would feel that I that that was like a failure or something, and I think it's a really complicated question um, uh that to me feels gendered also, like because there's a way in which um, doing the podcast, except for this episode, is more about listening and supporting and helping other people have a platform and and putting their work out into the world, and so there there are ways in which it does kind of duplicate some of the other frustrations that I have in the other part of my life, right?

[35:15]

And so I think he was worried like, oh, but if you want to be the star, then you're going to, you know, something about being in the podcast, like it, it, first of all, it's a supporting role to be a podcast host in a way. And second of all, you know, will you feel like, if people know who you are, but they only know who you are, because of Commonplace, that you you're a failed poet?

YANYI: I think another thing about it, is that when you were saying that it was, it's kind of a gendered question... Um, it kind of reminds me of, um, some of the stuff that you say in your work, which is that, uh, I think in *The Pedestrians* you have a line in a poem where you're saying, like, people interview me and always ask me about how I make time to be a writer and juggle it with motherhood and like, that's not really a thing. Um, and, how is it and why is it that having a podcast and having a platform that supports other people is necessarily about putting yourself in the background or being only a supporter and not being able to have those other roles at the same time?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Where I'm, when I'm in a room with another human being and I just, I, I don't know, I'm, I'm like endlessly fascinated in other human beings and then the their their facial expressions, the questions they ask, the questions

they answer, the the things that they won't say or won't do, and like how someone like reveals themselves to you and and and and like getting to know that person in in this particular way. And and also like knowing that somebody is That that it's for... that other people will be listening. So like how do you have a conversation a one on one conversation with someone but also expect that it will be interesting to a stranger?

YANYI: It's kind of conversational doula. Yeah, like um because you are, like, having a conversation with someone and trying to connect with them in the way that you would in any coffee shop. But you've probably, you, for your interviews, prepare for them and, or your conversations, I should call them. You prepare for them, you are there for, in a way where you've scheduled this ,maybe months in advance to talk to this person while they're in town or you're in town with, um, where they are. And, I'm, I'm really curious when you say like, uh, you're really fascinated by people, because I think I've heard you say that a couple of times in different, uh, different arenas of life, like whether it's been in Q&A's or lectures or even in Commonplace itself, because this is kind of a meta Commonplace episode.

Um, what, why in particular are you, uh, interested, so interested in other people, like what draws you to them and what makes you want to bring them out in, in some way, shape, or form or help them represent themselves?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, I think on some level, my interest in art is really my interest in people, and the art is an artifact or a record that is a way of getting to know someone or or imagining the time that a person spent doing this, and so in that... reading their poem or looking at their painting or learning about them is is this is a similar experience, right? But I think, I think that these conversations, I mean, first of all, it's, it's enabled me to have access to people who, who wouldn't sit down and talk to me otherwise, or who, who would, but, why would anybody sit in a room together for two hours and have this kind of conversation? And then the things that I find out about them, like the, you know, so many are just like popping into my head, but like Sabrina Orah Mark, I'm thinking about her in part because it's like the same time of year that I interviewed her or had this conversation with her last year was like right before Passover.

[40:00]

I, I mean, first of all, I had no idea that we'd gone to the same school at different times. I had no idea, you know, that she'd grown up in this incredibly, um, Orthodox religious Jewish home. I, I just didn't know these things about her. And then hearing her talk about them and, and, and these stories that she told about her life, like, you know, there are these moments where someone tells you something, I mean, I guess it's like therapy really, but it's like they tell you something and you're like, oh, oh... and, and it's not like, oh, now they just like suddenly become clear to you and you've figured them out. It's just this other level of depth. It's like, you know, it's a, it's, it's, I mean, I, I think this is how some people feel about, I don't, I don't know, like other ways of being in the world, like other people have physical ways of being in the world, or they have, um, I don't know, they climb mountains together and they, they don't talk to each other but they're, but like something about that is this really bonding experience.

I, there's something about like being in Tyehimba Jess' home and like seeing his books and watching how he moves his body around and, and listening to him talk about his work. I don't know, even know if I'm making any sense at all. Like...

YANYI: It makes sense to me. Just keep going,

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Laughs] Or you know, or, or, it's this, it's such a beautiful moment between two people. I want to know more. And I'm so like honored to be in a, in a, in a place with you where you're trusting me with this information, you know, or with, or with this like level of communication. Um, I mean, it's not always positive, um, but mostly it has been incredibly so, you know.

YANYI: From my perspective, it does, it does things for you because it, it keeps you in your comfort zone of like, you're a conversationalist. You're someone who is like conversationally doula-ing a little bit, and you like doing that and you like teaching and you like learning about people. Um, at the same time, the podcast becomes a, a key for other people who, um may not ask to be on a podcast, um, to, to have them feel as though they, they get to have space to talk and to reveal parts

of their lives with other people who are interested in poetry and interested in what, how, or interested in what the conditions of poets lives are.

Um, the poetry doesn't just come from nowhere. Like there's a very clear sense that I get not only from the ways that you talk to people on your podcast, but also in the work that you put out into the world that, uh, and you can tell me if you're, if I'm wrong, that you have a deep, you have a deep belief that everything that happens in someone's life is just inside of the work. Like, there's no such thing as like compartmentalization of the language that you use and the form that you use and the, um, the way that your body moves or the way that your face looks or, um, where you are in public transportation at any given moment, or, what is a weed?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Oh my gosh. So many things. I mean -

YANYI: This is what happens when we talk. This is why we got the pen and paper.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know. I'm not writing anything down [laughs]. Yeah. I, I totally believe that. Um, what I find really interesting is that sometimes someone's artistic work seems like a representation of who they are or their obsessions or the way their body moves through the world. Um, and sometimes it seems like not necessarily the opposite, but the way the, the, um, the filter that they use or the, or the armature, um, that they employ to survive being in the world. Um, because, you know, they, they can't be easily, um, emotionally accessible. And the, uh, the things that they make are the ways that they are able to engage emotionally, um, with language or with color or with the world.

[45:04]

And so it's real, that's also really interesting to me to see, I don't have any, like, theory, um, it's, it's more about, just feeling really honored to see whether somebody is like their work or not like their work. But even if they're not like their work, it's exactly what you just said. Like it's everything about their history, um, uh, comes into their work, even if their work is about blocking something about their history, even if their whole work is about creating a life that is antithetical to

something that happened to them or something that's inside of them or outside of them. Um, so that, that's something that's utterly fascinating to me.

Um, I'm also really interested in like, um, like I don't actually think that I'm really getting to know anyone. I actually think all that I'm revealing is the dynamic between me and the other person on that particular day in that particular moment. I think another thing that I was really needing at that moment when I started the podcast, but I think that it's, I've realized that I, I've always needed this and maybe I always will and maybe accepting that is that I think that I am a person who over and over again asks other people how to be, and so whether it's about you know, are there things you shouldn't write about? You know, are there things you don't write about? Like, you know, that's a question that comes up over and over because it's something that I am really obsessed with.

And so I've done that in the past, um, before I had a podcast, like I would ask my writer friends or I would ask anybody who would listen to me. Not, it has come to my attention that not everybody goes through life asking every single person they can what, what they should do? [Laughs]. Um, but I am that person and it's something that I find embarrassing and then, and then other times it's something that I am trying to think about as a strength, but the podcast allows me to do this thing that is really intrinsic to like, the way I move through the world. Um, and I can't, I think I always thought like, well, eventually I'll ask the right person or someone will give me the right answer and then when I, I won't ever have to ask again. I think, you know, at 50 episodes in, probably, this is just who I am, like it's connected to my fascination with other human beings or by other human beings, like, I'm astounded by the unbelievable complexity of every human being I've ever met.

And I'm also looking for something I think that there are things I think that are fucked up about me or wrong or weak or, you know, mistaken. And so I am looking, in the relationship or even if it's not you know, a long relationship, I'm trying to see myself through the other person's eyes. I'm trying to ask them how they live their life, if they have a confidence that I don't have, like, well, how do they get that? What's that about? So that just seems important to put on the table

because you know, there is something sort of transactional to some extent about about these conversations.

Just a really good example for me is like when I spoke to Alice Notley, it's really it was about recognizing that the, um, insecurity and the, uh, ambivalence and the, and like the weakness that I see in myself, is also connected to a vulnerability that's a really important part of who I am. It's not that Alice isn't vulnerable. Um, but she has, she has a conviction that I think I will never, ever have. And there was a way in which like coming into contact with that this past time helped me be both, uh, like more interested in like, how can I get some of that, but also how can I accept that's not my goal?

YANYI: One thing I think about when you say, say that, um, this need to like ask people about how to be is, um, my own experience of like living as a woman and how that is basically like the, the femme experience of like, if I want to be safe, I have to understand all of the limitations and the borders of what I'm allowed to do, because if I move outside of those bounds, um, bad things can happen. And I mean, that is a leads to another question, which is like three different questions that I need to ask you from all the things that you've just said.

[50:00]

Um, but has something happened on Commonplace, or even elsewhere in your career, where you have said something bad or not good, and people have come at you for it, and how have you handled that, um, in a way that is both accountable and, uh, from a place of learning, but also, like... what, what are, like, the things that you've had to think about along lines of, like, privilege and... privilege mostly, um, in doing the podcast, um, both privilege and oppression actually of like, there's certain dynamics that happen when I'm sure you talk to like White men, and ways that, uh, those conversations come to be, um. Has it been difficult? And how do you try to balance like, uh, being aware without, uh, putting yourself in dangerous positions or putting other people in dangerous positions? Because this is kind of like a, a public platform in a way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. You know, in some ways I feel, I feel like I started Commonplace to get away from the pressure and responsibility of hurting people in my writing.

And then, it, you know, all of these same questions, but in different form, came up with Commonplace. So um, like what is my responsibility when representing, when, you know, allowing someone to be represented on Commonplace? Like what if somebody says something that makes them sound like a jerk? What if someone is a jerk?

Um, you know, I do some light editing and, um, I have no interest in making somebody sound jerky, and writers are people who generally get to revise. And so, I would say that many writers are not that great at speaking extemporaneously. And that also the kinds of writers that I, that I talk to sometimes say something to try it out, right? Just like in a poem or in a piece of writing, we might take a risk and then we might put it aside and come back to it and be like, I didn't mean that at all. And then we can change it. And, you know, if you say something on the podcast and, um, what if you don't mean that? Or what if it came out wrong? Or, you know, um, so that's one thing.

Um, but what if you did mean it? And I am not pushing back hard enough? I'm not saying, I don't think that is really an okay thing to do. Or I'm, you know, again, I'm not the person who is judging someone else, but because someone who's listening to this, relies on me to push back and ask a question when someone says something, you know, really potentially offensive, um, if I don't, then I've let it stand, and um, the dynamic in the room is very much influenced by who I'm talking to. So if it's someone who has power over me, if it's somebody who is, um, intimidating to me, you know, for whatever reason, because maybe they're super famous or, um, maybe I have like a fangirl feeling about the person or maybe they, you know, run a contest that I might apply for one day or, um, or maybe they are being intimidating to me, sitting too close, talking too loud interrupting me - um

YANYI: That's happened before/ People like sit too close to you in a really uncomfortable way?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, or I've had weird moments of people, you know, it's very very rare um, but you know, people will like, you know, tell me something before we start recording that's sort of oddly threatening, that I don't even think about until later. Um, so those are weird moments. Um, and then, and then I have to think, you know, uh, and then what could be moments that I am doing to the other person that I'm not aware of, you know, what are, what are ways, what are things that I, you know, what do I give myself permission to take out because I just like didn't mean that at all? Um, or, and I'm trying to think of some specific examples, um, you know, without, um, you know, throwing anybody under the bus, um...

[55:00]

YANYI: The bus is ready [laughs]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know, but you know, it's really, I do, I do deeply, I, look, I think there are jerky people in the world. Uh, I, I'm not confused about that. But I also feel that most people are just fucked up.

YANYI: Also part of your poetics.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and I don't I it's I'm not, like this is lately, you know, an issue that comes up with, I'll just say, because this is a famous one that, you know, I have a long list of people who I would love to talk to for Commonplace people whose work I love, people who, you know, um, either I know really well, or I don't know at all, or they would bring something to Commonplace that hasn't been there, either in terms of their experience, in terms of their identity, in terms of their style of work, in terms of their, all these things, and like, I want it, I want there to be a real richness of, of difference, because that's what poetry is, you know, and that's what's like, so exciting for me. And even the work that I don't understand, but that like lights me up, I'm like, Oh my gosh, I have to, you know, wow.

So Sherman Alexie was somebody that, you know, was on this list and I had just gotten, um, his memoir. Um, and I was interested in particular in, um, I haven't read the memoir yet, but I was interested, it's about his mother. And so of course

I'm interested in anybody who writes about their mother. And then I was also interested in, um, I haven't had very many poets on who also write memoir and I was interested in that. Um, like, you know, how is it different and all this stuff.

And then all the stories came out about, you know, Sherman Alexie not treating, um, women very well, particularly Native women, and I don't want to uh give somebody, you know a lot of bandwidth um, who is mistreating other people. Um, and so what is my responsibility there? You know what, what... I think that's one that's not really about looking at my own privilege and, uh, exactly, except that it is because, you know, I, have to take responsibility for what is said on Commonplace and who is on Commonplace and the ways in which, you know, I'm representing myself, I'm allowing other people to represent themselves and, and, and who isn't getting heard.

So in my selection of guests, in the way that I edit or don't edit in, and then in the way that I prepare, um, and the way that I hope that I, you know, it is hard in the moment to be fully aware of like the questions I'm not asking or I'm not thinking of or the ways in which I may have brought something up, like in the Allison parish episode um, I say like a million times like oh and I really want to talk to you about ethics because Allison had this amazing, um, Youtube video that I saw uh where she talks a lot about ethics, ethics and coding and um, and we just never got to it, and it wasn't because I didn't want to, I just we really just ran out of time and then I got like somebody Posted something about the episode and was like, you know, you know, why didn't she ever ask that questions about ethics? You know, is she afraid to ask the questions about ethics? I'm like, no, I wasn't afraid I really ran out of time, but that's still my responsibility. And so, you know, there are those things, which brings me to the question you asked a million years ago -

YANYI: In the Cretaceous period [laughs] -

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, which is whether I've basically been trolled or whether there's been backlash, you know, or something like that. And, you know, it's incredibly common from my understanding, especially for women, but not only for women, um, you know, to, to really have, uh, people get very, very upset, um, about things they say and, um, online or on podcasts and stuff like that. And, um, I

don't think I, I, I, I'm like afraid almost to admit that I, we're, we're all knocking wood. Um, that hasn't been my experience, um, so far, and I really hope it won't be. I really would love to continue making this podcast, and I spoke to another podcaster recently who has stopped, and she said it was just, she just got so much hateful response, and I don't know if it's because the podcasts are so long, and so people who are really hateful have a shorter attention span [laughs].

[1:00:14]

Um, or I don't know, or if it's just too esoteric, like part of me does feel that there's like a difference between when I've, when I'm writing poetry, when, when I'm writing prose, um, I've written, um, so many, um, what I consider to be like really provocative and straightforward, um, potentially offensive things in poems that nobody's really said anything or gotten that upset about.

And um, when I write prose, um, the bar seems to be much lower, like people seem to get upset more about prose. And so I don't know where the podcast falls, and I don't know to what extent I sort of like subconsciously made a poetry version of a podcast in the sense that like what like, like I'm thinking about Erin Riley, like it's different to put up a photograph of yourself a naked selfie than it is to put up a tapestry of a naked selfie. There's some way in which the translation into another form does in some ways protect you. And I don't know what, I mean, certainly other podcasters are, are not being protected by the form. Um, so I don't know whether it's about podcasts as a, as a genre or whether within podcasting, um, mine is a, is a, a less in your face somehow. I don't know. Or whether they just haven't gotten to me yet? I hope not.

YANYI: So on one end, I had a couple of questions. The first of which was, do you work to be responsible for your privilege around class in your writing, and how do you how do you think about that, if you do? And then there's another conversation that we could be having about this constant judgment that people, I think, especially women, uh, come up against when they talk about any types of any type of feeling at all, um, and how those feelings are often, uh, tucked away or, um, blown away as like something too frivolous to be written about and not important enough to be written about, um, which is something that I really, uh, value about

your work, because you wrote a book about being anxious, like, uh, basically. Like, I mean, it's a thread that runs through a lot of your work, like, I think mental illness is something that we could really talk about more, um, because living honestly includes talking about that in your work, um, or writing honestly includes talking about them in your work. Um, so I guess the, oh gosh, so that was like five things, or maybe three.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I think what I'm learning in my life, maybe slower than I should, is that, um, many things can be true at once that may have at one point seem to contradict each other or not be able to, to, to stand together. So I think it's true that there's like real value in, um, the project that I set out to do in my writing. I didn't, I didn't, that, that I, that after I had written a few books, I realized was what I had done and what I was trying to do because I didn't realize it going into it, but but a few books in I did, and then I think that is largely about um, enlarging the frame of what is considered a poem or what is considered a poem worthy of writing and reading and publishing to include um, domestic content, to include um the voice, um of, uh, a woman who, um, has children, who spends a lot of time with children, um, who, uh, has a lot of doubt, has a lot of anxiety, feels depressed a lot of the time, um, and what that, uh, interior life is like and what the sort of dailiness of that is like, I'm certainly not the first person to do that.

[1:05:00]

Um, but, and to do it in a way, so it's not just the content, although including that content, I think, um, is really meaningful and important, um, and valuable. Um, but I think it's also, um, doing it in a way that is not heroic.

It is also true that, um, I was able to continue writing those poems. I was able to be an adjunct. Um, I was able to have three children and live in New York City. Um, uh, because I had enough money to do that. I'm able to do this podcast and, um, because, um, the time that I spend doing it is time I can afford to spend doing it because it doesn't make, you know, I'm not working, you know, two full time jobs, or you know, I, I can do that. Um, not only that, but I have three people who work on this podcast and I pay them. So, whatever way you look at it, um, the truth of my life is very much connected to the truth of my class. And, um, you know, and

there are all sorts of other privileges and, and other kinds of parts of like my, my background, um, and my present that contribute to that.

So, um, you know, I was able to, because I have a partner, um, who will support me in going to New Jersey once a month, um, to weed someone's garden and who will watch my children, our children. Um, I'm able to do that. Um, that's an incredible luxury. Like, you know, that's, I don't get a certificate for that. I don't get a degree from that. There's nothing that I'm not going to make any money from that. Um, you know, I remember that when I put my two older kids in daycare, um, I, I was one of the only, um, mothers, I was one of the only parents who wasn't a lawyer or a doctor or a professional person. You know, for me to, you know, other parents were only able to write their poems when their kids were napping, you know, that, that's at most two hours a day. Um, so I didn't have, I didn't have those sets of limitations. I was writing about other kinds of limitations, emotional limitations, logistical limitations, but I didn't have, uh, I had the means to do that.

And I think that like, you know, to not, uh, tell that as part of the story is, is like utterly dishonest and misleading, especially if part of what I'm interested in is um, not being dishonest and misleading in my work, right? Um, you know, and I think, I think there are also ways in which, you know, um, those decisions, which were choices that not everybody had or has, also hurt me, you know, and now I'm not sure I ever can get a tenure track job, and I don't have any job security and, or I have very minimal job security and, um, you know, I'm not complaining about that. I'm saying that there are all these different, really interesting and complicated ways in which, um, you know, uh, I have access to a really good therapist and, um, I, because of all of these parts of my life, like if I were to become like really severely depressed, someone would notice. I have a safety net that's like both in so many different ways that enables me to take certain kinds of risks, to make certain kinds of like, um, decisions. And so I mean, even cultural things like, um, you know, I don't come from a religion where I believe in hell. So that enables me a certain kind of security as well. Like I can say how I feel. I can write a book called *The Bad Wife Handbook*. I can, you know, imagine, um, certain kinds of, um, you know, inappropriate thoughts and feelings, and I come from, you know, uh, a background where deeds are problematic, but thoughts and feelings are not. I mean, they're not sins; they can be problematic. Um, so what kinds of freedoms,

um, does that afford me? You know, so I don't know. I'm sort of mushing a lot of things together.

[1:09:57]

YANYI: I'm very interested in your practice of, um, self care and what you do to, um, process and create your own work? Like, what is your, what does your bubble look like? What does your personal house look like? If you have one? Um, and -

RACHEL ZUCKER: You're sitting in my personal house [laughs].

YANYI: I know, but like a metaphorical one.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

YANYI: Um, because I, and especially in, uh, like in conversation with mental illness and how that in particular, um, can often get in the way of intellectual and artistic work. Um, and just like the basic functioning of your life, obviously.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I am a very, very high functioning anxious, depressed person who feels very uncomfortable about even calling myself an anxious and depressed person, um, because I feel like, uh, how can anyone who is so high functioning claim that? It's just, it feels, um, insensitive to people who are not so high functioning, anxious and depressed people.

So, I mean, it's always kind of been this way for me. And as I said, I also have like a lot of resources. So, at the times in my life where I really felt, um, you know, not immediately, there was a long period of suffering involved, but at the times in my life where I've been like, this is now over a line. It's not okay. And having kids helped me, um, have a different standard for okayness, because it's much easier for me to feel like, I need to be okay for my kids, than I need to be okay for myself, who cares, you know, if it's just me, who cares. But I think that there's like a, um, I'm being so roundabout right now.

YANYI: You, this makes you uncomfortable, but I'm here with you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I, well, because, you know, yeah. I think, I mean, we had this like very brief text exchange, um, the other day where I was saying, I said something about like, you know, that when I was most, uh, uh, unhappy is not as a word I feel comfortable using, doesn't really describe it. Um, in college I got really good grades. It's always been a coping mechanism for me to make lists, to, to, to, um, come, you know, even commonplace. It's like, I was really having a tough time in my marriage. I was really having a tough time emotionally. Um, and, and it often is stabilizing for me to, um, engage in a project, and I don't always realize that that's what I'm doing, but I have a level of wellness that enables me to, you know, start a project, which is why it feels yucky, at best to say, oh, I'm really anxious. I'm really depressed. Cause how could a person who is anxious and depressed start a podcast? And yet I did. So both things are true. And I also recognize that like when I'm feeling very depressed, it's even more difficult for me to say I'm feeling depressed because my depressed brain is like not allowing me to say that.

And then there's a bad cycle that happens where it's almost like to prove to myself that I'm allowed to say that I'm either anxious or depressed. It gets worse and worse until I'm like, okay, now I'm actually having a panic attack, and there's there's almost a tiny bit of relief in those moments because, I think that as horrible as it is, there's also a way in which I'm like, this is real.

YANYI: Well, that's that's definitely part of the value of um, like poems like "Pedestrian" where it is really about like allowing that anxiety and that depression to exist. And you were saying earlier in this interview that when you when something's going on with you and you can't say it it's like, it suffocates you.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm hmm.

YANYI: And not being able to talk about mental illness is also very similar to reprimanding yourself in the ways that people may have talked to you about class of like how could you say how could you be complaining about any of these things when you have all this other stuff, when in reading tumblr memes, as I do sometimes, like tumblr says that we will tell ourselves that something worse is happening in the world in order to sublimate what is actually happening to us.

[1:15:08]

And we have a very rigid idea of what is acceptably healthy that prevents us from kind of confronting what might be actually overwhelming, that does need to be talked about but only becomes overwhelming because you don't talk about it and it's this cycle of like pushing it further and further down until you've kind of dug this dug this deep well of stuff that needs to come out, and that also reminds me of um, just like domestic violence, for example, uh, there are things that we don't count necessarily as violence that may, maybe we should be, and that we should be talking about, and that's really like for me the kind of like the political aspect of a lot of the stuff that you're writing, which is just like why don't we just include everything, and what like, can that be valuable in itself?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I think that's... two things. One is, I have seen it for myself and definitely for other people, how life saving and organizing it can be to have a diagnosis and to feel like, oh, you know, this isn't, I'm sick, you know, or this isn't me, or I'm not at fault, or I'm not, it's, I'm not, it's not that I'm not trying hard enough. At the same time I think that, um, there's something really interesting to me also about, uh, of, of sometimes wanting to push back away from the term mental illness, not because of the stigma, um, and, and the whole concept of diagnoses because, um, we all are so weird, and, and to say that there's normal and then there's ill is to, is to, I mean, yeah, there are, there are definitely times when, you know, I'm like this is not okay. I can't function like this. I'm having a panic attack. I'm not going to write a poem about this panic attack or in the middle of the panic attack or I'm not, you know, I'm all I want to do is lie in bed and watch TV. It's not interesting. It's not a poem.

There are other times where I think, why is everybody write their poems as if they think one thing at a time in a linear fashion? That's certainly not how I think. And, and I want to include that. Not, and it's not a value judgment. It's not like, Oh, this is interesting. This kind of anxiety, this level of anxiety is interesting, but just to like enlarge, like, some people think like this and it's like constantly neurotic and you know, overlapping thoughts and like distracted and this and that and you know, like their attention does works in this way and other people, it works in this other way and like, you know, you can tell, or at least I can, I can tell, uh, there's a

different vibe when I talk to someone on, on Commonplace, whether they are leaning towards mania or leaning towards depression. I'm not talking about actual bipolar disorder. I'm talking about, um, there's different temperaments, there's different, and some people might actually be manic or what the, what fulfills the diagnosis for that. And some people are actually depressed.

But I also think that our understanding of what is quote unquote normal is that I don't even know what that means um, and so I think like I don't know. I just I that's something for some reason that's important to me to say also, like to make space for the ways in which within mental wellness, or within health, people have a really, really beautiful range of ways of being in the world. And and to and to like try to think about like sometimes, my way of being in the world is not healthy for me, and sometimes it might be annoying to someone else. But it might be fine, right?

Yeah, I think this is a really really fascinating, like like this is a fundamental part of my work and I think some of the shame comes from this part of my work, but yeah, I mean like I wrote a whole book about my mother and I didn't have an abusive mother.

[1:19:53]

And I think that there is like a feeling at for writers, particularly memoir, and poetry to a lesser extent, but also poetry, where it's like, you don't have permission to write about certain kinds of content if it's not, um, if you're not writing about trauma.

You know, being a White person and writing about your life might be just like a total waste of time for, for somebody to read. That might just not be what they're looking for. That might not be what they need. It might not be what they're interested in, but I definitely don't want to live in a world where either I or anyone else feels like they can only write about the most damaged part of themselves or the trauma that they had or, or go out and look for trauma. My God, I really don't want that because, you know, I feel like, um, I've been extremely lucky, um, in my life in all of these different ways. Um, but, and, not but, and, I think that to some

extent, not having been, um, a victim of domestic violence, for example, um, enables me to write about some of the emotional violence of marriage, of a very long marriage that I think would be a very different kind of consideration of attachment, um, separation, individuation, independence, connection, um, boredom, uh, desire, um, restlessness.

Um, like what are, how are those, um, things at play in a quote unquote normal marriage, in one in which, like how much, how much monotony and boredom is inherent in in parenting, um, that's not to say that, you know, is okay to complain. Um, it's not, it's gross. Um, and it's, and it's thoughtless. Um, but I do think that, um, I, yeah, I think, I think that that's what I did. I think I wrote a lot of books about, um, what are the feelings? What is, what is the range of feelings um, that are surprising and you know, I didn't know I was going to have them, and other people maybe didn't know they were going to have them, um, of a kind of, uh, not so traumatic life. And I think that's annoying and boring to some people and for other people really uh meaningful and important to hear. Um, so and sometimes I feel good about that and sometimes I feel really embarrassed about it. That's what I did with my life [laughs].

YANYI: Well, um I feel like I still, so you you kind of answered one of these um, who is your audience now, and who would you like your audience to be? Um, I'm really interested in kind of what it's like behind the scenes of the reception for the podcast and um, who the work is really helping at the moment.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I really love the idea that it would be a community, um, not just like a product. I mean, I think that there are people, um, you know, either on Twitter or the patrons do have communication with each other. Um, and I love the way that like we have links to texts and stuff that people, um, put together, that people talk about on the, on the show. Um, and some of my favorite emails are from people who can't afford to go to an MFA program, don't want to go to an MFA program, you know, or have been to an MFA program, but you know, were either kind of harmed by it in, in some way or another, or have moved abroad or they, they are not able to find a literary community. And, um, that Commonplace is providing them with a sense of literary community and with, um, you know, uh, uh, they feel included in that, not just like, oh, I saw a good movie and it helped me

pass the time, or it helped me not be anxious on the subway, but there's something that for some people, um, is helping them feel, um, included, you know, or that they think, oh, I also have that problem, or I don't write every day and, or yes, I do write every day or, huh, that's how Rita Dove does it.

[1:25:00]

So when she gets stuck, she always goes to form. Okay. Well, I'm stuck. So I'm going to go to form and see what happens. Or like, wow, I love Danez Smith's work, but I didn't realize that they're always writing sonnets like, you know, what, what, you know, to, to, to be kind of, um, you know, in the room where it happens to quote Hamilton, um, you know, to some extent, like, I think that's, that's the most important thing.

So anything that can make that happen more. Anything that moves it towards more community, more interaction, more, um, less hierarchy, um, more input, um, more conversation, like on every level seems really great.

NICHOLAS FUENZALIDA: This is Nicholas Fuenzalida, one of the producers at Commonplace. I met Rachel while studying at NYU as an MFA candidate in poetry. I took two classes with her, and she was my thesis advisor. After her conversation with Yanyi, Rachel asked her husband Josh Goren to speak with her about the podcast, his view of it, her view of it, how it fits into their relationship or challenges it, and what Josh would like to see more of in future episodes.

We've excerpted the most salient moments here, in which they discuss the different selves Josh sees Rachel perform when she reads her poems, her lectures, as a podcast host, and as a mother and wife. Here are Rachel and Josh.

JOSH GOREN: I was wondering, okay, there's this story that you tell about how when you wrote the Modern Love piece, when you published the Modern Love piece, people reacted to it differently than they ever had to your poetry, even though you felt that the content of your poetry is more revealing and personal and problematic or potentially disruptive than what was in the Modern Love piece. And that's, this was an, you wondered whether or not it was about what, what that was

about, whether it was about the wider public audience, whether it was about the difference between poetry and prose.

And I was wondering whether or not common, how Commonplace fits into that? Whether you're hiding yourself a little bit in Commonplace, because you know that it actually, I imagine you would feel that it fits into more the Modern Love prose side of that dichotomy or whether or not you... aren't whether you don't feel that you're hiding yourself or if that's not the right way of describing it?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, well I have the amazing opportunity right this minute to turn that right around. I mean of everyone in the audience, you would know what I would be hiding if I was hiding something. So, you know, you get to see me at home. You get to read my books of poems. You get to re read, obviously read the Modern Love piece, which was about both of us. Uh, and you, um, hear these Commonplace episodes. So, do I seem the same to you?

JOSH GOREN: No [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do I seem like I'm hiding?

JOSH GOREN: Well, yes, on some level.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay.

JOSH GOREN: I mean, we all, I mean, maybe that's just a fact of any kind of artifice or public. Your poems are definitely playing with that game a little bit, although people, I think some people in your audience are recognizing like real sharp truths, but even then the specifics are not all there. The whole picture's not there. Yeah, You're, and then in Commonplace, it's like not, it's kind of in the structure of it itself, It's not really about you. You're interviewing other people. Yeah, sure. There are moments when you Share something that's, something about yourself, a lot, a lot of moments, and that's part of what's good about Commonplace, but you, part of what, I, now I'm, am I asking you a question? I might, I wonder whether or not I actually feel, now that I'm talking it through, like

if I would actually like to urge you to be more raw, even than you think you may have been already on your podcast.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But, like, what, what do you even mean exactly by raw? Do you mean the moments that I make a mistake or embarrass myself or reveal something that I shouldn't? Or is there, is there another, like, thing that I'm not, uh, you know, accessing in the podcast? Like, what is, what do you mean by, what is the thing?

JOSH GOREN: Well, I think you have a special skill. I, I feel you have a special skill of saying something that everyone immediately recognizes to be true, and that, and that somehow no one was thinking or perceiving, and, but it requires a real, like, risk taking. And I think it is probably happening on the podcast. I don't think it's necessarily about revealing something about yourself, although I think it often involves that and often involves sharing something.

[1:30:10]

It is like a rule-breaking gesture sometimes. It's like a saying of something that, so, for you, sometimes that has been to say something about our family life, or, sometimes it is about revealing something, or, but often it's about revealing a feeling. Like, if this is, if this is a conversation about Commonplace, like, what, it isn't necessarily gonna be in the realm of, revealing something about your self or even about in a poem, it wouldn't necessarily only be about yourself, but about your perception of some societal structure or like some thing that you observed in the world.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm hmm.

JOSH GOREN: It would be about the other person and the conversation or the topic that you were... It would be more interactive, like have those moments occurred?

RACHEL ZUCKER: I feel like they occur in every episode, but maybe, maybe, well, I mean, you listened to the first some of them. Did you not feel like that was happening?

JOSH GOREN: I mean, some of, I, I feel like they happen, but I also, one of the other pressures on you is the friendliness of the conversation. And that is socially, like, inevitable, like, of course, like, and I want, I have a fantasy that there would be an episode that was more combative, you know, or that was more like...

RACHEL ZUCKER: Other than this one.

JOSH GOREN: [Laughs]. This one should be more combative. This is totally fake [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: So you said... I'll ask the questions here. You said one time, uh, uh, more than one time, and this is something we've argued about, um, that you didn't like my lecture voice. Um, how are my, are the podcasts in my lecture voice or?

JOSH GOREN: Sometimes. So it creeps in and it creeps in and out. I guess that's right. You know, I actually, so, so there's different voices. There's the poem voice, which I've always loved. It does not feel... I understand that it is a performance voice also, but somehow it's never, it always feels like, I don't know, like if you were a rapper or a singer, of course, you're singing, you don't sing your way through life or rap your way through life, but when it's good, I would just, I would be like, it has like that power and I've always felt that way about your poems, especially when I hear you read them, especially when I hear you read them to an audience, what I call the lecture voice feels cautious, and like a little bit kowtowing, careful.

And yeah, on, on Commonplace, there are moments of all of the different kinds of voices, but yeah, I don't like, I don't, I hate to feel like you're on, like you're being careful. I don't want, you to be blunted. I don't want...

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay, okay okay, one thing that's obviously completely different about commonplace thanen writing poems or writing prose is that another person is sitting in the room with me, you know in real time face to face, and so I think you're absolutely right, there's like a completely different set of like, responsibilities, and and so the the thing that you like about my work, especially my poetry, is that I guess it pretends that even if someone were sitting in the same room with me so to speak in the poem, that I would say the really horrible thing.

Well, it's interesting because in Commonplace, there's two different audiences There's the person I'm in the room with and then there's the future listener. And then there's also like Christine Nicholas and James. You know, it sort of sounds like what you want to encourage uh in me, uh, and for me in terms of the podcast and in terms of my work is to be more fearless, to be, you know -

JOSH GOREN: Wicked is a word I use.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, wicked. Uh, and to have it be more about myself, which is interesting because I feel that in the other part of our life, which is to say the whole part of our life, you are, um, it's hard for you not to, uh, reward the other part which you're criticizing now, which is a more supportive role, as a more receptive role, is a more listening role, which I think is my primary role with you, with the kids, with my teaching. And maybe you're saying too much so with the podcast, like, you know, I'm in a very similar position in all of those relationships where I'm primarily not self presenting and performing, but like, you know, listening, asking questions, making connections, figuring out, uh, how to draw the other person out.

[1:35:37]

In your experience of me in our personal life, wouldn't you say I'm a good listener? So therefore the fact that that I did do this podcast, which is really a lot of it, you know, most of it is about listening, not about whatever, you know not about this thing that you're describing that you like in my poetry -

JOSH GOREN: Mm hmm -

RACHEL ZUCKER: But don't like, if you, like, you, the poems are 5 percent of our life together. 95 percent of it, I feel like I'm in a, I'm in a listener mode. And this I have said to you before like that, you know six months into doing the podcast I wondered to myself, like wait, did I just make a whole podcast because I felt like my husband wasn't listening to me and my kids weren't listening to me, and so, you know and didn't seem to find me interesting, but like now I have pod track numbers so I can see how many people at least are downloading it maybe even listening like -

JOSH GOREN: I download it [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, that's so wrong, that interruption [laughs]. You know, like, did I did I basically, you know, find a way to be listened to, even if most most of the podcast is not really about me, but about, you know, me presenting, you know, these other people, but also like, even in the in the recording of them?

JOSH GOREN: Well, do you feel satisfied? Did you get what you need? [Laughs].

JAMES CIANO: Hey, this is James Ciano, also producer here at Commonplace. Like Christina and Nicholas, I, too was a student of Rachel's at NYU for my MFA. Want to hear more of Josh and Rachel's conversation? Consider becoming a [patron](#) today. Already a [patron](#)? [Patrons](#) will have access to a less abridged version of the conversation between Josh and Rachel on our [Patreon](#) site. Patrons also will have access to sound files of Rachel reading her poem, *Pedestrian*, and Yanyi reading two poems from his forthcoming book, *A Year of Blue Water*. [Patrons](#) can access a PDF of Yanyi's chaplet, *Diary*, published by Belladonna. Thank you, Belladonna, for offering us that.

All active [patrons](#) will be entered to win one of the following items in our next raffle: copies of *Starting Today* and of *Women Poets on Mentorship*, courtesy of University of Iowa Press; Rachel's books, *The Bad Wife Handbook*, *Eating in the Underworld*, and *Last Clear Narrative*, courtesy of Wesleyan University Press; *The Pedestrians* and *Museum of Accidents*, courtesy of Wave Books; and *Home/birth*, a

Poemic, and *Mothers*, courtesy of Rachel herself. A big thank you to all the presses. [Patrons](#) also will be entered to win a limited edition chapbook of the 2015 Poets House Fellows, designed and with contributing work by Yanyi. For more on Commonplace, visit our website, [Commonplace.today](#). To become a [patron](#), sign up at [Patreon](#).

A few days after the initial recording, Rachel and Yanyi recorded this phone call follow up. Rachel was concerned that she had talked too much in the initial conversation, and that it had really sounded more like an interview. For the first part of the phone call, they talk about this, and about Rachel's theories as to why she may have spoken too much, and what kinds of things about herself and about Yanyi were left undiscussed. You pick up this phone call now, about 20 minutes in.

YANYI: Do you want to talk about the mentorship first?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, yeah, let's talk about that first.

YANYI: It would be valuable, for example, for people to know that, uh, I, I chose you specifically to be my mentor, because I did not know you at all when I picked you, like, as a person. I knew, I had read some of your work, um, and I saw you on a panel at Sarah Lawrence, and before that, my only contact with you had been, I'd gone to a reading at NYU, um, and you were reading, and I accidentally sat next to you, um, during the reading, and you told me about how you liked it when reading started on time [laughs].

[1:40:05]

And I, and I just remember, like that is, I, I remembered that because that was something that I also was like, I think that's really true too, like it would be a lot more considerate for the people who like planned and got here on time that the reading starts on time. Like, and uh, you introduced me to Josh actually that night cause he was sitting next to you. And um, and then you went up and did your reading and I was like, [whispers] *I just met a famous poet!* [laughs].

I think that must, that must've been in like, 2014 or something. I feel like you just came out with *The Pedestrians* at the time, and you're reading from that. Um, but that is my first memory of you. And, um, uh, the second time I feel like I really saw you, um, uh, or like my second, like, intense memory of you is like you were speaking at Sarah Lawrence on a panel on hybridity, because I was just starting to kind of look around for a mentor of like, who would I want to work with? Um, and I just remember of all the people who are speaking on that panel, hybridity is something I'm very interested in, uh, poetically. And I thought that I, I loved the way that you thought about the topic the most. I remember that you had prepared remarks and that you, you had really thought about it in a way that made me feel as though, uh, I, I felt like I, I saw a little bit of what your process might be like as a writer, and you're someone who, very similar to this conversation actually, who will really like try and get at everything, like sweep all the corners type of person. Um, and, and the ways that you do that is by asking a lot of questions.

Um, and that was mainly what your remarks about hybridity were, of like, how can we know what it is? And, um, after, after the panel, I introduced myself to you, um, and, uh, I think I requested you at the workshop right after that [laughs]. It was a, it was a very specific, like, um, interest in your intellectual practice.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Can I ask you about that, even though it's uncomfortable for me? Um, what is it that you were, that you were hoping to get, um, from the mentor, um, program and relationship, and then specifically from, from me or, or your mentor?

YANYI: Um, specifically, I was looking for someone who was, uh, who could be an intellectual partner for me, um, and collaborator with me. I really wanted someone who was kind of open to anything. Um, I, I had also heard, and I don't know where I heard this from, but I heard that you were an incredible teacher. Um, and that's something that, that to me, like, that shows a lot of what your values are as a writer and as a person who moves through the world.

Um, I think teaching is one of the most undervalued and most important vocations that exists in poetry and outside of poetry. Um, and, and then, and I, I wanted someone who was a good teacher. Or someone who demonstrably done, been

doing service around those things, because to me that, that, that is a value alignment for me, and I wanted to work with someone who aligned with me and around what type of poetry community I wanted to cultivate and be a part of. So, yeah, I think that those were the main things, and I don't, I don't remember if I started listening to Commonplace before or after I met you, um, is the thing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I don't remember how much we talked about this in our other conversation, but so you asked for me, and then I got this really lovely invitation, um, from the Asian American Writers Workshop, um, and then, and it included initially a selection of your work, um, a pretty short selection.

[1:44:53]

And, um, I was like really flummoxed about what to do because, um, I really was super interested in wanting to be a mentor, in wanting to be a mentor, um, to someone outside of the, um, of the normal academic, you know, job that I have, um, like to feel what that was like when I wasn't someone's like thesis advisor or someone's teacher.

Um, and I also like really specifically, um, I really like the Asian American Writers Workshop as an organization, um, the, just the, the, um, interactions I've had with it and, and, um, like events I've gone to and stuff. And so I really wanted to do anything I could to like participate and support that organization. Um, and like, especially like in part because it's a non academic, non degree granting organization, which I feel really interested in.

YANYI: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But then specifically, like, I really loved your work. And, as soon as I was like, yeah, I totally want to do this, um, it was not so simple because, um, I'm not Asian American. Um, I'm White, and I was like, wait, I really want to be careful about not taking up the resources of this organization or not inserting myself into this relationship, um, or this organization inappropriately. Um, and on top of that, one of your poems in specific, in particular, all of your poems to some extent, but one of them in particular was very much about kind of, uh, and I don't

have, I haven't read it since, so I, I'm not going to remember exactly, but, um, it was a prose poem and at the end it was about Whiteness, and it was about, like, white people being blind to their own Whiteness. Um, and, um, it had, like, um, e-mails, um, or like excerpts from emails and I, and so one of my first thoughts was like, wait, is this a trick? [Laughs].

Like, um, am I, yes, but like, am I, or am I part of a performance art piece? Which I wouldn't necessarily be upset about, but I was like, oh, so my, how my response to this email could very well be, you know, if I'm not thoughtful, uh, or even if I am thoughtful, um, one of the emails that Yanyi then puts in his work.

Um, like how, how am I not, how can I participate but not necessarily as like a person blind to her own Whiteness? Which is not my favorite way of participating. Um, and also not at all what I felt would be like a, um, you know, a, a positive mentorship relationship for you. And, and I also think I thought about, um, like often, um, pregnant people will ask to have a doula, um, who is the same ethnicity or same, you know, background as they are. Um, it's, it's not always, but sometimes that's, that's comforting and useful. Um, and so there were a lot of thoughts that I had around that question. I encountered your work in a very specific, and interesting, and like provocative set of circumstances. It wasn't like, I didn't read your work, um, you know, in a journal or in a contest or like it was, it was like, here is some work and do you want, and I was reading it in the context of this question of the mentorship.

YANYI: Right, right. And it was also, it was a, it was like kind of two things. It was both an opportunity and also like, yeah, I mean, it was kind of, uh, for me, it was also like a question of, like, do I use my opportunity at Asian American Writers Workshop to ask someone who is not Asian American to be my mentor? Um, which was a big question for me, and ultimately, like, uh, I had to think about my history of, uh, being in White spaces. Like, I graduated from Columbia, I am from the Midwest, like, I was indoctrinated in a lot of ways in, uh, in the suburbs of Whiteness and then institutions of Whiteness. So like, I had to think about like, okay, well, I'm, I specifically like, applied for the Asian American Writers Workshop Fellowship so that I could be part of a community that was not centered around Whiteness. Um, so what would it mean for me to pick someone who is

white or just even just like, not Asian American? Um, would that be me wasting my opportunity?

[1:49:54]

And, uh, I think it is really like, um, it is really valuable for me to have understood and experienced a, a friendship at that time with someone who is White, who, um, really taught me that investment and care and intimacy can happen between people who are not of the same ethnicity and that even understanding, um, even if it's not from the same experiences can happen, and that you and I, it made it possible for like you and I to be invested in each other and to be thinking about the harder questions of our individual existences apart from each other, um, together, like it would, like that was a possibility to me.

Um, and I respected the way that you thought. And I respected what you were doing in the world, um, in addition to knowing what I did about your work, which was mostly like how much you, how much you strove to talk about as many parts of your life, and specifically the lives of women, uh, as possible, uh, like how doing that as much as possible.

Um, and having, uh, invested a lot in, um, this friendship with someone who is, uh, femme, um, not necessarily a woman, but like understanding that there are a lot of life experiences that I myself did not experience as a masculine woman. Um, like it, your work became very important, uh, as some something I wanted to be in conversation with myself intellectually and poetically, but also just like in terms of investment, uh, uh, investment in a person. Um, and I feel really grateful for our relationship and what it's turned into.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think it's so interesting, because the way that we came together was both around, and maybe this is always the case, but it's like, just so interesting the way it's visible in our situation. Like, the way that we came together around our similarities, but also our differences are like, so, um, uh, such an important, um, thing. Uh, part of, like, the architecture of our relationship. Right? Like, so, clearly, you know, there's an affinity between both of us write about our lives. We write about, like, real people. We write in a kind of, like, daily I mean,

your book that's gonna come out has a kind of quality of like a, it has like a journal quality. It has like a dailiness, a description of the real world and engagement in the real world. It's not, you know, neither of us right now is writing a kind of high lyric, abstract, removed, you know, metrical, rhymed kind of poetry. Um, um, that doesn't mean we don't like dip into that sometimes, or we might never, but that's not what either of us is like really doing right this minute.

Um, and so all of that is, you know, like wanting someone to be a collaborator, um, uh, wanting, you know, somebody to be, uh, an intellectual, uh, companion. Um, and all of those things are, are like different, different things that have to do with similarity, I feel like. Um, and then, but then because it was, you know, through the Asian American Writers Workshop, and you had to ask yourself, like, am I missing an opportunity here? Am I, like, wasting, you know, part of this experience to, to, to, like, continue to stay in a space and make a relationship in which Whiteness won't be centered? And I also was, you know, you know, like, well, am I taking someone else's opportunity here, or is it going to be, like, what will it feel like for Yanyi, what will it feel like for me?

Um, and so, like, so, so our whole relationship started, and in some ways, like, still has that piece of it of, like, the, that, that difference of ethnicity. And then there's the gender piece of it, which I think, you know, can we talk about that too?

YANYI: Yeah. I mean, that, that part is like super, it's complicated in its own way of like, like there are experiences of womanhood that you have and will experience, have and will experience that I never experienced and will never experience.

[1:55:10]

And then also there's the gender thing of like, I'm trans. So like, there's a whole experience around, uh, transition and understanding my own relationship to my body that you may not have to, you may not have to go through in the direction that I went through it. I think like, and then I will never be pregnant, and I'll never be like a biological mother to anyone. So that's something that I think is related to gender, but I, I mean like, I, I really like, I'm really curious as to like how you

conceptualize motherhood, like is it a gender? Is it a role? Is it a, is it a place of transition? Like, um, like to, you know, uh, get pregnant, watch your body change, feel your body change in very acute ways.

Um, and then to like, go, you know, uh, then to give birth and to have a different body. Like, there's, I don't know, there's all these changes that happen within that are kind of acceptable within the structures of patriarchy, of like, a woman's body will change at this time, but it's really like a whole, it's a transformation of sorts. Um, like, that does change the conditions of your life, I would assume. And not temporarily, like, there's lasting effects afterwards.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Oh my god. Yeah, so we haven't really ever talked about that stuff, which is fascinating to me. Um -

YANYI: We'd have to record a whole other podcast.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I know. I was gonna say, we can connect in terms of similarity and in terms of difference, and we can also disconnect or misunderstand each other or misunderstand ourselves or hurt each other along lines of separate, of, of, um, similarity and difference. And that is also what I'm trying to write about in my poems and in my critical work.

Um, and so there's also a way in which like our relationship, and on the podcast, for sure. Um, and, like, in a huge way. And so, our relationship is like a physical manifestation of some of these, like, intellectual and literary interests, concerns, you know, obsessions, and I think, like, and in ways that we're, like, just starting to think about and, and explore.

And each one of these, by these I mean, uh, modes of exploration, including writing poems, making a podcast, um, talking to another human being, um, uh, mothering a person, like all, like all these, all these different kinds of ways, um, or just like daydreaming, like whatever it is, have different, um, like, opportunities and consequences and like dangers and benefits, if that makes sense?

YANYI: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I think that like, I think that then, I think, I think I was like, Oh, this is so great. I'll ask Yanyi to have a podcast conversation with me. And it is great. But also, I must be crazy, because it's like, there's... I can't even describe how I would even conceptualize the three dimensional shape that I'm trying to construct as a model of both our relationship and also like the whole world and how I and you separately and together fit into that shape.

YANYI: Yeah. It's, well, like, I think that I think that what's truly fascinating about our relationship, a lot of what you've said kind of touches on it of like how we have, how we have these similarities, but we can't see the similarities without the difference. Like you can't see my, you don't really see my gender without my race.

[1:59:52]

Like, there's no such thing as gender without race, and, like, in the same way that I can't see your gender and your expressions of gender without race, of, like, White femininity, White femininity is a toxic thing that hurts women, um, who are inside of it, and it also hurts, like, it hurts women who are, like, White femininity is a type of toxic femininity.

So there's that, and then there's also the fact that, like, well, what does it mean for me to be trans and Chinese? Like, how there's so little, um, like, I have rarely thought about conceptions of gender outside of patriarchal Chinese or the patriarchal Chinese culture that I personally grew up in, in my, in the house that I grew up in. But like, I know that historically that there are different conceptions of gender in Chinese history. So like, which one is the real one, which one is more authentic, um, and which one, like, is it the one that I kind of like measure my gender against, or is it this like, like if I were to talk about the thing that the workshop has really given to me, it's been a, the opportunity to redefine and self define what my heritage looks like and how I integrate it into my life.

Um, and so there isn't like, it's not that there's one more authentic thing. There's no, there's not one more authentic experience of gender as a Chinese person for me, it's that, in the same way that I'm transforming my body and my conception of myself, I can transform the history that I self identify with. Um, and, and, and I can

transform the ways that I decide to, um, create relationships with people who I have thought were different from me, but who are not necessarily so, which kind of sounds like, like liberal, kind of White liberal bullshit, but like, um, I think it's very challenging to construct a reality that can include a diversity of experiences and voices without it diminishing some of them or making it so that some of them are standing on the shoulders of others, et cetera.

Um, so one of the feelings that I always have when we have conversations is that there's so much to say and we don't have time. And like, um, I left our conversation, uh, last weekend, kind of feeling that way of like, oh, I had all these questions to ask you, but the things that we talked about are also genuinely things that I wanted to know about. Like, I wanted to ask you all those questions about the podcast. I wanted to ask the followup questions that I asked. Um, it's not that you're too much. It's that you're willing to, like, you're willing to do the full sweep. You're willing to like, get as deep into that thing that you can go, and try and go even further than what you believe is capable, what you believe you're capable of.

And so what that kind of feels like is that we're having like long conversations and you're the only one talking, but like I know that you care about me and that at some point we're gonna have a conversation like right now, where it's just like me talking a lot about my feelings and there's going to be room in our relationship for that. Um, so the thing about conversations like Commonplace is that we can't reconstruct our relationship inside of a less than two hour podcast. Um, we can't accurately represent it there. And frankly, like people don't get to be inside of it, like other people won't get to be inside of it because they're not living it.

Um, and that's, that's like one of the very valuable things about conversations like that existing in the world. It's just like, for me, it's like a reminder of like, wow, like other people in the world can, like, I can cultivate relationships with other people in the world where conversations like this can be possible. And as many of them as possible, um, I think my best relationships are like that. Um, and that's, that's kind of what my poetics, the poetics of my book are about of like, There's this feeling of reading through it of like, I wrote like 350 or 400, I think it was like 349 or something, um, poems for that book. And the final page count was more like 72.

[2:05:00]

And, um, I chose the things that I chose because not everyone needs to know, uh, what I copied and pasted from my horoscope on a given week [laughs]. Um, and also because, uh, not having everything, and I think this is where I where our poetics may differ a little bit, slthough I do think that you edit and you choose carefully like, what you present to the world, but there is a sense for me of like, I don't want people to know like, as much as possible about what was going on for me, or what was happening. Like, the point is to feel like there's a sense of endlessness, and that there's more. Because there is, like, you you can't just read a book and, like, get what you need for your entire life. Like, you have to have conversations like this, and do that over and over again. And that's what makes a life.

[Music]

DAN SCHIFFMAN: Hi, um, this is Dan Schiffman. I'm a Commonplace advisor, although I don't think typically I give very good advice. Actually, I think I once told Rachel to improvise and not read from a script, which is what I'm doing right now, even though there's a script in front of me, which is clearly bad advice. So let me get back to the script.

Uh, thanks for listening to this special episode of Inside Commonplace with Rachel Zucker, Judah, Yanyi, Josh Goren, and the Commonplace producers Christine Larusso, Nicholas Fuenzalida, and James Ciano.

Did you actually make it all the way through this episode? If so, I'm kind of curious. I want to do a little, uh, unscientific survey here. Tweet [#insidecommonplace](#). Let's see if anyone's actually listening to me at this point in the episode.

Um, so a big huge thank you to all the [patrons](#) who support Commonplace and the presses who send us books. Thank you to Moses, one of my favorite people in the universe, for writing this cool song. Um, I have a message from your mother who would like you to know that as much as she likes this one, she is in fact ready for a

new one. And to all of you listeners, thank you for listening. Just the mere fact of listening is something that keeps this wonderful, beautiful, amazing podcast going. I'm so honored and thrilled to have gotten to say something. I feel awkward, like I should wrap this up now. I'm just gonna wrap this up and say goodbye. Goodbye, everybody.