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Episode 53: SA Smythe (June 2016)
Transcript by Alba Fredrick

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: SA Smythe – **SA**

Conversation:

DT: Hello my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry short and today I'm joined by SA Smythe. Hello SA.

SA: Hello.

DT: As always, we're gonna start with a reading.

SA: Alright, thank you. This one's called 'Language'.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time]

DT: Thank you very much. Hello again. Thank you for coming down to the Old Kent Road, South-East London.

SA: Pleasure to be here.

DT: The first question's always 'Why poetry?'.

SA: Why poetry? I think a lot about it because I'm primarily an academic, I think, although my friends have been telling me to consider myself as much of a poet as I want to consider myself. Words have always been really important to me. As you saw in that poem there, language is also a really considerable part, not just of who I am as a person, an academic, a poet, or all these labels, but, coming to consciousness and reconciling myself with my family.

I have a lot of different languages going on in my family and so trying to access beyond, even though it's in English, accessing ways around and between that has been really important for me. There's something about poetry. I mean, I love novels. I began reading at a really early age, but something about how poetry is the way to break those rules, break the norms as long as you know them, that's been really important to me.

DT: I think in terms of language, poetry seems to work in a way that is more about a way of speaking, rather than the words themselves and languages are much more about how we communicate rather than just [what we communicate]. There are cultural elements to all languages and ways of describing things anyway. Do you work much in different languages other than English as well?

SA: In terms of my poetry, yes, but to take a step back and respond to what you've said, I think that's interesting to me as well because most of my poetry has been written. I've written a lot of things that I am only recently trying to get up the courage to share out loud. Recently in London I've been doing lots of open mics, I've been asked to do performances in Manchester, Berlin and here in London, but I think what you're saying is right. The spoken word is something separate almost, than poetry. It makes me feel closer to what I've been trying to accomplish in the written word. But, yeah, I do write in other languages.

DT: I've been lucky enough to see spoken word events in other countries. I used to live in Scandinavia so I saw a lot - even though I speak Norwegian. You don't miss out on as much as you perhaps expect by not understanding the language. If a poem is delivered well, there's still a lot of emotion involved.

SA: I think about the embodiment as [being] really important. I have a friend of mine and we're trying to create a chapbook but with her visual work and my written [work]. And it's really helping me think hypertextually with the words and what they look like on the page and what they're really trying to convey. So, giving the words their embodiment without my voice but wholly with my voice, if that makes sense. Different ways to embody the words that I've been trying to grapple with, and the ideas.

I used to live in New York City and there's this place called 'The Sidewalk Cafe'. Regina Spektor came up there, before she became Regina Spektor. A lot of people who are musicians but they think [about] embodiment in the way they do the phrasing of their lyrics in really interesting ways, and that's where I learned about - from as far back as hip-hop culture and the beginnings of that - the ways that spoken word is now... I don't know how to describe it, but that spoken word phrasing that people do. I mean that's really based on one guy from the late 70's.

I don't do it when I read, as you've heard, but I'm really interested in other ways to recite and get around that common phrasing. Basically, I'm really interested in the textuality of it which is kind of anathema to the spoken bit, I dunno if that makes sense.

DT: I agree. I think there's definitely a spoken word language, there's definitely a way of speaking certain words.

SA: It takes on its own language. Everything we do we try really hard... It's the words that we're speaking, it's the embodiment that we're doing but then it goes back to language. We can't really escape it so I like to think and write about that inevitability.

DT: I think we'll talk about language a bit more in a moment. But what outside of language have been the other influences over your writing?

SA: Family is definitely one of those things. And also vulnerability, which sounds really cliché. As the word came out of my mouth, I just cringed at it. For the listener, I'm cringing! So I present a sort of mass killing of centre. Gender is a thing that oppresses all of us, and I think a lot it about in terms of my scholarship and in terms of my creativity and just living.

And there's something to be said about pushing that while still being comfortable. I'm not sure if that makes sense, but really, there's something about masculinity and butch identity and these kinds of tropes that are bound to maleness that are really interesting to me and I really want to shatter them. I'm not linking femininity to softness, masculinity to hardness but there's something that I really like within myself about the softness and I often see that in my scholarship or the way that I dress and carry myself in the world, I'm not afforded that and something about poetry lets me stand up and be soft even in my writing.

I get to sort through, for myself, and then get to share with others the fact that I am, damaged is a really harsh word, but I've experienced things that have wounded me - and I could either let them take advantage, or I can really grapple with that and sort through them for myself and for my community etc. And one of those things would be, with the loss of my father, and the fraught relationship that we've had. Ever since that, I've experienced a really strong or

craven desire to keep writing and to write about that and then eventually get to the place where I can see that beyond myself.

It's not just about me and this particular loss, it's really loss of language, loss of a sense of innocence and wholeness that can be afforded to us. And that is not just in a nuclear sense but also in terms of diaspora. I'm not the only black person, person of colour, queer person who has travelled, either emotionally or been forced to move or have been wrenched from a sense of comfort and stability and so that's a real inspiration.

DT: There's definitely a lot to revisit there. But we'll take another reading for the moment, if you don't mind.

SA: Sure. And this one is called ‘Rictus’.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time]

DT: Thank you very much. Now I do believe that was Italian.

SA: It sure was, David!

DT: I'm glad you told me it was Italian beforehand. I think I picked up enough of that. Maybe there isn't a need for a question, but maybe you could explain why you chose to read that particular poem today and how language and in particular Italian informs your life and your work.

SA: It's my favourite sounding one. I actually scrolled beyond the one I intended to read based on our conversation. I really like it. There's a portion in the poem that is hypervisual. You'll see there's definitely a space between, not just one stanza and the next, but the words themselves are scattered on one stanza on the page and then in the next stanza I apologise for that space.

I think a lot about apologies and blankness. The gap or the aporia is a word that I think. It's a greek highfalutin word meaning 'this thing that cannot be articulated'. There's a double irony there in that Italian is not my first language, or my second. And so the apology can be one based on identity but also one based on trying to reach or get closer to bridging that gap of silence.

DT: So is there an element of guilt towards the silence? I find sometimes that, especially with people that start writing and then getting up and then speaking - as well with spoken word - there then is an element of guilt, culturally in the scene, of staying silent about certain subjects.

I suppose people that write about identity in terms of people of colour, queer, gender-queer, do you think there's an element of guilt for any periods of silence and reflection and not continuing to talk about things? Or is there a pressure, outwardly, to keep talking about these things.

SA: That's a really good question. I've been thinking about that A LOT. I almost used some profanity, don't know if that was allowed on a podcast...QUITE A BIT, David. I've been in London for a year after moving from California and you enter different communities and you see different politics at play or not at play and learn to get in where you fit in or resist where that's necessary. But what's been really interesting, there's a whole thing, which is not for this podcast about how Facebook and social media presence plays into that.

The shorter answer [is] I think you're right and I think that's a little bit toxic, when people are not generous with themselves, and so it's like a soft apology. But also with community, whatever fraught thing that means, where they feel like: Ok, I'm coming to terms with my consciousness as a queer person, as - you're already black - but coming to terms with black consciousness and any kind of radical or leftist or deeper form of that label throughout history or various communities, and then it's not ironic, but it's almost a double-edged sword.

The more that you get conscious, the more that you feel like you have to take on a more leftist or radical persona, which actually defeats the purpose. You're supposed to become more liberated in yourself and how you identify etc. Also know that you are one person and you don't represent an entire monolith. That's the first thing they teach us in Black Radicalism 101. We are not a monolith. I represent multitudes of x, y, z thing.

Sometimes I see someone express an opinion and then the radical community will jump on and say "Woah. This is not conscious in these ways, you're forgetting these and these people. You're not doing these things right. And it becomes a bit of an attack..." You're not falling into line of another monolith, as it were. And so the apologies comes from all sides. I'm guilty of it from both ends.

The apology is a little bit different in terms of what I was just writing about but it does link up in terms of how and who we're apologising for. And it's not a thing that I know how to articulate but I really wish we could make manifest a liberation that doesn't require apologies and also it enables generosity. I can be able to make a mistake and not feel guilty. If I'm experiencing something as an individual while recognising I'm a part of something greater, I should still be able to slip up and get to my own journey, not on behalf of anyone else.

DT: I think also, and this goes for all creatives. It doesn't matter about gender or sexuality or any of these issues, but the more you get pigeonholed by other people (because this doesn't relate to how you view yourself, it's always the boxes you're put in by other people), the less you're allowed any form of escapism through your writing. This has only come from conversations with other people. We haven't spoken about this between us but I think there's a lot of guilt from some writers that they want to just write something that is pure escapism sometimes. And then there's a guilt that's involved. I might be going off on a bit of a tangent.

SA: No, I don't think so.

DT: This perhaps comes back to when you talked earlier about recognising elements of softness in yourself and not wanting to link them to feminine traits. This all comes back to what languages we're allowed to use, in other people's eyes, not within ourselves. I suppose

that then takes us back round to this original theme of what language you're told you can use. And through the course of your own writing, being able to find [it].

SA: If I can go and take another stab at that first question 'Why poetry?', it's because identity politics is a trap and I want to be able to articulate that as many times as possible, maybe by that very sentence. Just to be clear, I was saying I didn't want to link femininity to softness but I'm super happy with being described as any kind of feminine anything. The term 'masculine-of-centre' is something I picked up in the US. It's not even used as much in the UK. When people pick it up, it's clear that they've had encounters with the US.

If I could just 'be', there's this phrase 'Can I live?' and if I could just do that, David, that would be really great, but it's really impossible. That sense of guilt is really toxic and I'm trying, for myself, not to feel it. It is language that's described by other people, but then I'm also I'm an anxious person, I'm hypercritical. And so I try to pre-empt people either reading my work or reading my performance. Gender is a presentation. It's performative. I try to take that a step [further] and then try to subvert it before they even get to make an opinion. But then Who 'you' are really gets lost and then you find yourself swallowed up by that.

DT: It assumes a lot of knowledge and attention by the audience. Because, if they're not listening, it doesn't matter.

SA: They take what they take anyway. They're still going to be reading you the way that they want. That's absolutely true.

DT: I think there's still more to talk to talk about. But before we go on, we'll take a third and final reading please, SA.

SA: That sounds great. This one's called: ‘The truth is’.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time]

DT: Thank you very much. I believe at the moment you are a visiting fellow at the University of London. So, maybe we can talk about what you're up to at the moment and how that informs your writing.

SA: I'm affiliated with the 'Institute of Modern languages' research at University of London and it's a joint affiliation with the centres for cultural memory and of contemporary women's writing.

My PHD is on the history of consciousness in California. It's on Italian East African Women's writing, so women and also gender non-conforming people who identify themselves as Italian but have East African origin. And it's considering - really these are hyper academic terms - but things like ontology and epistemology, so the states of being, and the formation of knowledge that's based in blackness. And really, that links with Italian colonialism, thinking through politics of migration and the Mediterranean. And what I use to bridge those things is the aesthetics of queerness and diaspora.

What I hope my projects are on in the future is really just shedding light on the writings that come about that are based on writings of migration, specifically from East Africa into Italy and internal migration in Southern Europe. I'm really invested in thinking through blackness and black identity that is not rooted in any sort of empirical way. So what we think we understand about blackness, even what we think we understand about black Europe has been overshadowed by, first of all, anglophone culture... there's English, French, German colonialism. And we think that that is the whole story. And Italy, what I work on specifically, gets a minor rap within that. And so working in that has been really interesting personally, but also politically.

Thinking about politics of citizenship and identity and belonging. Things that I've recently realised I'm obsessed with in my own personal narrative, but are really important on the broad scale 'cos Italy's got its own goings on with citizenship struggles at the moment. But it's not only that, it's not just thinking about citizenship and second-generation identity in Italy, but really thinking through what it means to be black. How does the ontology, or being black change when we consider the Mediterranean as a site of that.

The Mediterranean's a very mixed place. Southern Europe, Italy included, is a very syncretic place. It's a place that includes different kinds of ethnicities, cultures, musicalities, identities. It's a very diasporic place in and of itself. So if we really think, instead of saying there are a lot of black people coming (what we read on the cover of all the newspapers now), people coming into Europe are really thinking blackness [is] already embedded in these places. What does that really mean for us to be black?

These writers that I'm really invested in - when I say writers it's really broad - they're poets, they're hip-hop artists, they're musicians, film-makers, creative writers [who] don't and cannot do that in places like Italy where it's ostensibly a hyper Catholic, (you know, that's where the Pope lives!). It has this Catholic foundation but also has this, with what we know now to be Italy, there are anxieties already between the south and the north. Those are definitely related to race and ethnicity and other kinds of belonging, and in fact Italian colonialism, in a way, exacerbates the anxieties that were already present and they cemented what it meant for Italy to become a white nation. And that's why I'm interested in it.

In England there was, ostensibly, this white nation that this empire went out. In some sense, Italy's imperial forays happened internal to itself. In Southern Italy was an Arab empire. It definitely had some syncretism, this amalgamation, this group of mixing and mash-ups that really need to be explored more. I'm really interested in that. And it also feeds into my obsession with language because the language of colonialism... I'm gonna get so much flack cos the word that's coming to my mind is 'beautiful' but I mean it in, you know how awesome initially meant full of awe and awful and negative, I don't mean it like that. Colonialism's bad, right?! That was the number one thing I wanna make sure I get [in]; 'identity politics is a trap, colonialism - bad', as long as those things are clear!

But the way that these writers, most of whom are women, there are a few co-writers that I study, and also writing collectives that have different ethnic, age, national identities that write as one. I'm really interested in the beauty of that, in the aftermath of colonialism. The way that they can say "Here are the pieces that you've left us ... your violence..." one of the writers,

Gabriella Ghermandi says that, "It stops with the me...the buck of colonialism stop here. I'm writing back."

The way that they're able to resist the trend but still taking on the national identity of Italian is really impressive to me. And this is coming from someone ... my father's first language was Spanish and he would not teach me Spanish. My mum literally begged him. I begged him eventually when people at my school were learning French and learning German. I was like, "Can I just get in on this other language because I have to learn it at school anyway. It's not a negative thing." But I learned from a very early age the hierarchies of language and identity. And to be able to write about how these women and people take that burden, liberate themselves from that burden and write back from a place of beautiful resistance is impressive and I'm glad to do that work.

DT: I think we're gonna have to wrap it. I hate cutting these things off 'cos we could talk for a lot longer about this. Hopefully we can talk again. Just to wrap up, if people wanna check out your work is there any way they can follow you in terms of finding out where you're gonna be reading?

SA: Yes, indeed. I have a Twitter, which I'm working on being more active on. It's @essaysmythe. Also Wordpress and gmail. And I'm happy to do any readings. You can write to me at those sites.

DT: I'll put the links in the description box. Thank you very much SA.

SA: Cheers. Thank you so much.

DT: Really interesting.

SA: It's a pleasure.

End of transcript.