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This transcript was made possible with the aid of funding from Arts Council England.

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Episode 86 - Emlyn Maurizio, Nadia Drews, Agnes Torok (24th October 2016)
Transcript by Christabel Smith

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Intro:

DT: Hello, this is the Lunar Poetry Podcast. My name is David Turner. Today's episode is in three parts. Coming up at the end is Swedish spoken word artist, Agnes Torok. Before her is Nadia Drews and first up is Emlyn Maurizio. I met up with Emlyn in South London, where we both live.

We got together to have a chat about Emlyn's poetry and, we talked about a few things, mainly revolving around identity, as is often the case with most of the guests, but specifically Emlyn identifying as queer and Colombian. Emlyn doesn't have any websites or blogs, but we will be reposting any gig dates in case you want to go and see them.

Keep up to date with what Emlyn's up to and what we're up to @ Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Soundcloud and Tumblr and @Silent_Tongue on Twitter. Download all new and previous episodes on iTunes and Stitcher apps. Here's Emlyn.

Part one:

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Emlyn Maurizio – **EM**

EM:

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

DT: Thank you very much Emlyn, how are you doing? Thanks for coming to join us. Because that poem is so heavily laden with references to identity, maybe you could tell us a bit about your background?

EM: I was born and grew up in Milton Keynes, but I identify as Colombian. My mother is Colombian, my dad is Welsh. I have always had my mother around me and have always been drawn to that side of my cultural identity. I've been to Colombia many times as well and always felt that in a place that was predominantly white, by being othered by people around me, so Milton Keynes is quite a multicultural place, but it's within its own bubble and it's a very weird place to grow up.

After living in Milton Keynes, I lived in Sheffield for three years, studying photography, then I came here. It wasn't until I came here that I found other Latinx people who are also queer who really embraced it and loved each other and that was something I didn't have access to back in Milton Keynes. There isn't really a queer scene there at all. To find that was a huge comfort to me. I've been able to find my voice, I guess, living here and to stumble upon Colombia here as well. There is such a huge community here and it's on my doorstep.

DT: I was going to say yeah, living in Camberwell, Elephant and Castle, it's a pretty good place to be.

EM: Absolutely, and Brixton as well, Peckham too. I have that and I have access to it. It's something I wasn't afforded growing up, except when we would go to Colombia. I've been quite privileged that I've been to Colombia as many times as I have, six times, at different stages of my life. I've got to experience it as a child, as a teenager, as an adult. It's been many years since I've been. It's nice to have something that's close to home at home, and I really value that.

DT: You mentioned your mum in the poem. How much of her experiences of moving informs your work?

EM: Quite a lot, especially as when she did first come to this country, she did have to deal with a lot of racism. It's funny, I grew up not knowing the language, which was something she was denied to do for me as well, out of her assimilation to British culture and her way to survive.

So now I am making it my responsibility to learn the language, and within a lot of the poems I do, they're mainly in English, but I switch to Spanish, at least some Spanish I know, or I know I can translate. I think that's a really important part of my work, showing that disparity between the language and what was denied to me, growing up.

DT: I had a similar experience, my grandfather was Spanish, but by the time he and his brothers came here, they were so determined to fit in, in quotation marks, whatever that was, there was very little Spanish. Some of my cousins speak Spanish, but I think it was down to their individual parents' decision. That wall can go up very quickly can't it?

EM: Absolutely.

DT: I'm wondering whether it's a particularly British thing, to force that form of assimilation. To just forget everything that came before.

EM: It is a forced thing, especially from the everyday people around you. I was always told, I have to be proud of my Britishness as well. Growing up, even though I was denied the language, I always had the food, the culture, the music. My mother has quite a few Latin-American friends in the town I grew up in. At least that was there. There was something I was in love with and really, that was me, that was what I was and who I was. And who I am.

DT: How did you first get into spoken word or poetry?

EM: I've always had a love for poetry. But in terms of actually doing it, performing it, I started when I was living in Sheffield, but it wasn't really focused on anything in particular. I look back at it now and it was kind of meaningless stuff. I don't really perform it that much now. It really has been since I moved here and I have been inspired by artists, good friends of mine, like Travis Alabanza, and SA [Smythe] and other QTIPOC performers that I've seen.

My friend Shana as well, who does a lot of music. That really brought it out of me. SA is of Latin American descent as well, but I didn't realise that until later. I'd not seen many Latinx artists or poets doing that kind of stuff. Like I was saying earlier, since coming to this place and realising the QTIPOC, particularly Latinx QTIPOC, scene here, it was a huge inspiration for me.

Also, I've been finding out a lot more about my own heritage in Colombia and in South America in general, the history and everything. That's been a major influence on me.

DT: And has your work developed in that way, since coming to London and meeting these writers? Even with those three names you just mentioned, that's quite a formidable list isn't it?

EM: Yeah and it's great as well, because they're all friends of mine and people whose work is beautiful, people who are beautiful as well. I feel really lucky I have them in my life.

DT: Maybe we'll take a second reading at this point.

EM: To give it a bit of context, this one I wrote about my cousin Alexander, who passed away many years ago. He was the first person in my family in Colombia who I found out was openly gay, which was a huge thing for me because it was at a time when I was a teenager and I was really nervous about being queer-presenting, but also just telling anyone in my family about it.

So it was amazing. We only met him once as well. I have this very fond memory of him taking us places in Bogota. He had this great charisma and beautiful smile. Sadly, a year later, we found out he passed away of an HIV or Aids-related disease. I wrote this last year. This is also to honour my mother as well and the way she dealt with it when she found out. This is called The Whisper.

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

DT: I was speaking to the poet Andra Simons yesterday, he's from Bermuda, and there's a very strong queer voice in his work. When I first saw him talk and read, it was at an event at the Poetry Library called Queer Poets and Teaching, and there was a question at the end around, would the ultimate progression be for people to drop the label 'queer'? In that, if we were all equal in some way, would that no longer be necessary. His answer was that he was very proud of the label.

And when he explained the answer, it comes from, because he grew up in Bermuda, the colour of his skin didn't other him because he was very much in the majority there, so it was the queerness that othered him. And I was wondering, it may seem like an over-simplification, and obviously there are many layers to everybody's work, but what do you feel is the strongest identity that comes through your work? Is it the Colombian heritage or is it the queerness? It can obviously be a mixture as well.

EM: I feel it's equally both, because both have been part of me my whole life, both have been struggles as well within predominantly white, masculine spaces. Even in the, I say there isn't a queer scene, but in the so-called queer scene in Milton Keynes, there I didn't feel comfortable, both as a queer person and as a Colombian. For me, both of them I feel just come together in my work.

DT: Do you think the message of your work is always recognised by audiences in London or do you think sometimes it's missed? I sometimes feel like, when performers of Latin American heritage talk about issues around racism, sometimes audiences, obviously

predominantly white audiences, are like, is that a serious problem? It doesn't always seem like they get it.

EM: Yeah, and I feel like that has to do with the fact that as Latinx, we don't really have an existence in this country. It's here in London, but I remember someone telling me it was only recently, last year, I can't remember, that in Southwark, there is a huge Latin American community and they have finally managed to get their identity on those equality forms.

That was something I never had. I always ticked Other. And like, Please specify: Latin American. I've had experiences with other people as well. The kind of racism that I've dealt with mostly is purely fetishisation, which tends to be directed at the whole cocaine issue. And then when it comes to me being queer as well, my experiences with many people, especially gay cis white men, they're like ooh, how exotic. In terms of performing and if people get it, I don't know. I've had reactions when people have come up to me, and they've said they've taken to it and told me thank you for sharing this.

I remember I did a performance with the London Mexico Solidarity last week, on Tuesday. One of my friends, Diana, who organised the event, she thanked me for sharing my work, and it was the first poem I read, around the issue of language. Because she also, with her being Mexican-Canadian, has also been denied a language. I was so grateful when she came up to me and said that. I already knew she had that experience, but we kind of had that moment where it's like, we see each other, we feel each other and we know that this is what we've been through. That was really comforting for me, for sure.

DT: You mentioned earlier that you studied photography in Sheffield. Is photography something you continue to work with now?

EM: Yeah. I still do photography. Not as much lately because I've been focusing more on performing and my music and poetry. Since being in London, I've taken part in photographing certain protests and actions around Latin American activist groups. I've also tried to do a project using found imagery from my mother's past, as well as using my own found imagery, to create a narrative about my heritage and culture. That's still a work in process.

DT: I always find it a surprise that more poets and spoken word performers don't also have a firm interest in photography as well, because they seem to fit so well together, that whole act of documenting and in short form.

EM: It's funny you mention that. I was actually thinking about this today. When I was at university, my tutors used to call my work poetic but more specifically in my writing, when I was doing my research, annotating, mind-mapping and stuff like that. They would always say, the way you write is very poetic. I guess now I've taken that next step or at least transferred my work somewhere else.

DT: Maybe you could tell us a bit about the music as well, and what link that has to the writing?

EM: I've been doing music for a while now, longer than I've been doing poetry. In the same way with my poetry, in recent years I've been writing more about the same kind of stuff. The way I write with music is slightly different. I don't know how to describe it exactly, just more in the way I write. I have pages and pages of short sentences that haven't been finished, but often those tend to be the ones I use for my music and seem to flow better as music.

DT: What influence did your trips to Colombia have on your music?

EM: It's been six years since I've been. Because I haven't been there in so long, I haven't found any inspiration from being there as such. But then I do at the same time, though I think that's more centred around where I am now, with the people I have around me, other queer Colombians and other queer Latin Americans as well. I guess that's mainly rooted within my mother, from stories she would tell me and the experiences of my abuelita as well, when they were in Colombia together. It wasn't an easy time for them either.

I would say that's definitely where a lot of my inspiration comes from. I tend to rewrite these stories or at least reference them, in connection to myself and how they've shaped me. I can never sit down and be like, okay I'm going to write something. It doesn't work that way for me. I feel like that's too forced. It's just when something occurs to me, even if it's just a line I think in my head, I make that connection and I'm able to reinterpret or tell the story through a song, through a poem.

DT: It may just be because I'm living in London currently, and I meet most of the poets that I interview, just because it's so much more convenient, that are in London, and then you naturally meet either immigrants or children of immigrants... There's a very strong theme in their work, I think, of retelling stories for their families. Do you feel a slight obligation to do that as well in your work? Or, maybe obligation is too strong a word.

EM: They are personal stories. So I wouldn't say I felt obliged to tell them because they are personal, but I'm willing to share them because for me, it's also a form of therapy and dealing with the everyday and even the past, with the experiences I've had with other people with regard to homophobia, or queerphobia, and racism. It's my way of dealing with those thoughts and feelings and those people and it's important for me to perform these in queer spaces as well because I'm not comfortable doing it in predominantly straight places.

I wouldn't want to go through all that stuff again. They don't deserve to hear it. It's something I will share with people who have that understanding and will engage with it, whether that's with other people, I don't know. At least I know within the queer space, I have a level of comfort where I can do that.

DT: I think we might take a third and final reading, please.

EM: This poem is one I wrote for our vigil for the Orlando victims. We held our own vigil because... There was that vigil in Central London, which was huge, but there was a complete disregard and a complete whitewashing of our people within that. It was important for us that we had this for us as well. There was also the shooting that happened in Mexico, which went completely under everyone's radar.

Well, the media failed to tell the story. This violence happens every day to our people in South America, Mexico, Central America. It was important for us that we had it for ourselves. There were so many people that came, which was amazing to see. I wrote this for the vigil, but for those people as well. This is called One Last Breath at the Party.

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

DT: Thank you very much Emlyn, and thanks for joining us.

EM: Thank you for having me.

Part two:

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**
Guest: Nadia Drews – **ND**

DT: That was Emlyn Maurizio. Next up, we've got Lizzy Palmer talking to Nadia Drews. You may have heard Nadia read on a couple of recent episodes. She read a poem by Niall O'Sullivan for the National Poetry Day episode that we put out and she was also reading as part of the Poetry Unplugged 20th anniversary celebrations.

As you will find out from the interview, Nadia hasn't been reading for that long so, as with Emlyn, she doesn't have a website or blog that you can follow, but if you want to find out what she's up to then we'll be posting updates on all our social media pages. Here's Nadia.

ND: The Things She Did Not Say.

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

LP: Thanks very much, that's wonderful. So, I don't know where to start with you because there's so much I want to talk to you about. I think I'd like to ask you first about the strong influences you appear to have in your writing. Because I know you, and I've heard you perform a lot now, it seems that the main, or two of the main things that have influenced you a lot have been music and politics. Correct me if I'm wrong. But perhaps if you'd like to talk a little bit to us about how those things came about, how you got involved with them, and why.

ND: Absolutely, and yeah, music and politics really, those are the things that have shaped anything that I put on paper. The politics is in my family history. I was brought up by a single-parent mother who has had a lifelong commitment to socialism, which involved the experience of canvassing for Labour, heckling Liberal Democrat candidates outside the window, identifying with the Anti-Nazi League, continual conflicts in terms of her standing up for what she believed was right.

That led me to go through quite a rapid development politically, which meant by the time I was in my teens, I had already become alienated from the extreme left of the Labour Party and joined a Trotskyist organisation. I left home with the idea I would change the world. I did that with a red guitar that had been bought for £10 by my mum off the local yoga teacher, which was a beautiful guitar that was promptly stolen as soon as I hit Liverpool, stereotypes notwithstanding, which is where I left home to.

I thought changing the world as a revolutionary would also involve me changing the world of music as well. So I had grand visions, many of which weren't realised. I think in middle age, probably what I am still trying to act on is those impulses from teenage, which means I think the world is rotten to its core and I believe music and other art forms, including poetry, can play a role in lifting people's spirits to change it.

LP: Were the politics and the music always intertwined for you?

ND: Yeah, that was my mother's responsibility as well. I can hear her wincing at having that laid at her door. I was born in San Francisco in 1967 and arrived in Lancashire from there in 1969. With my mum, with a suitcase full of vinyl records, which contained records like Alan Lomax's recordings of prison songs. He was one of the first people who recorded the music of African American people.

Also, music from people like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, which she'd heard played live down at the docks. The longshoremen would have those musicians playing. She was a member of the left of the Young Democrats, so she canvassed round Watts during the riots in Watts at the time. So in the suitcase, when we arrived in Lancashire, there were politics and music really.

LP: Where did the poetry come in?

ND: I had an unreasonable, irrational antipathy to poetry from quite a young age, which was typical of me, in that anything I felt was going to exclude me from culture, I hated. Although my mum had almost any book of poetry you would want to have in the house when I was very young, I felt I was excluded from that in the school environment.

I reacted to that by defining lyrics as being distinct from poetry. And again, typically of me, I'm a very slow learner, in middle age I've come to poetry that seems to me to be like the independent music scene of the early 80s. It's become clear to me that when I was writing lyrics, I was probably a secret poet as well.

LP: When did you actually start to perform your poetry?

ND: About 18 months ago, probably. I'd become a musician a long time ago, but had arrived in London and fallen on hard times and found a way back to community through the local poetry scene. I live very close to the Poetry Café, so like many other poets I've discovered through the Lunar Poetry Podcasts, I came through Poetry Unplugged.

LP: That's where I first saw you actually, and probably quite a few times before we actually met. It's funny who you manage to just bypass for ages, and who comes together. Perhaps we could have a second reading at this point.

ND: Yes. I was just talking about having moved from the States to Lancashire and this piece is called Punky Sue, I Love You. I found myself a child of a counter culture in a council estate that housed lots of very unhappy working class girls, but this is about the love I had for them.

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

LP: Thank you. I love your poetry for the sounds. It's very, almost tasty when you read it! It surprises me that you've only been reading for that long because, it's made to be said aloud. So I was wondering how the thought of performance and reading aloud have an influence on the way you write? Has it changed much over the course of your writing career, as it were?

ND: I think probably what's happened is that I've brought something of the drive or the craving I had when I wanted to become a musician into the poetry and performance world, which just means that I care. I'm not a spiritual person in any way, but I think the stage space and its visibility are so valuable. They terrify me, but it's probably what I've wanted out of performance of any kind.

I definitely wanted it as a musician and was never able to realise it properly, but in poetry, there seems to be so much opportunity, really, to be onstage, to use your voice. I think probably, in certain types of language, colloquial language, slang, the kind of things you find in ordinary speech, that I would hear working-class kids use, I would envy because they were the charismatic kids, those are things I put in poems because I wanted to have a chance to say them.

I would have been too shy as a kid to say them and I find myself onstage, rocking all kinds of inauthenticity, leaning on a Northern accent that my elocuted mother would have ticked me off for, swaggering in a way that if I'd ever done it in a playground, would have led to a sound thump. I think I'm playing out some kind of childhood fantasies there.

LP: I don't see it as inauthentic at all, it really comes across as very believable to me, and really full of emotion as well. Do you find that it is one of the places where you release emotion and tension and things like that, as you maybe do when you're performing music?

ND: It's funny, I've never been comfortable with the idea of music as therapy or self-exploration, nor poetry. I know this is happening to me, I know there have been points of real crisis physically and mentally in my life that I have found some place to recover in through language and performance and I know I am finding that now.

I am a desperately self-conscious person. The moment I think about that as an intention, I feel it's all going to evaporate, but I know there's an exorcising of something happening there. I feel it very strongly.

LP: Do you find it's more in the writing itself perhaps?

ND: It all seems intertwined. I can hear the language when I'm writing. I'm terrified of form and of scrutinising my work, which is why we're surrounded in tattered, soiled pieces of paper. I fear what happens when I look at the written word and try to edit it, but I know that when I'm taking a piece of paper and actually reading it, so it wouldn't work for me if I were just to write for myself, which is interesting, and it wouldn't work for me if I just practised and did it one poem again and again.

There's something in the process, the ritual, that I'm engaged in now that is making me happier than I've been for a long time.

LP: I don't think you always have to be able to pinpoint it either, why it works or how, I think it's ok to just do it, as long as it's not making you utterly miserable.

ND: Yeah. I think I fight it because I bring a lot of the points in my life where I feel most in control as a person and they are usually the points of analysis, which precludes living in any kind of meaningful sense a lot of the time. I think I'm trying to avoid myself. I don't really want to look at myself in the mirror here.

I want to just have it happen to me. There have been many times when I've stopped at the brink of something because the analysis hasn't fitted the practice. I don't want that to happen with the poetry.

LP: I understand. Could you tell us a bit in general about your writing practice? How you do sit down to write and when it happens.

ND: Again, it's having to avoid all proper analysis just to describe what's happening. I've found that I was actually writing song lyrics that I would bring into a poetry environment. They would have verse-chorus formats and so that process was about leaning on the patterns of lines, but also having that sense of build to a chorus, repetition, a musical rhythm.

So it was about making a song work, having a riff, building to a chorus that would make people listen, those sensibilities. Then something very odd happened because I was doing that and sort of got spotted in the sense that, I thought I was quite deep undercover. But Niall, who runs Poetry Unplugged, tapped me on the shoulder and said, I can hear ranting poetry.

Ranting poetry would be the kind of fusion of music and politics that was at the point of my political epiphany in my teens. He spotted that and the moment he did that, he said, it's ranting poetry, but reaching out for something more. I resolved not to listen to that or try and act on it, because I knew it would ruin the work, so what I ended up doing was just continuing to write.

Then something strange happened that's made it longer form, there's less rhyme involved, more concrete images that are being used. There is storytelling going on that is personal, but not intended to be and all these things are un-engineered, seemingly. They are just kind of occurring. I think those are much better poems, more poetic than the other pieces I was doing. I'm not sure and I'm uncomfortable about testing it, even.

LP: Could you give us some names of some of your main influences, in terms of people?

ND: In music, I've always been really dogmatic about this and have obsessively and compulsively followed certain people. So it would be Paul Weller and Morrissey who I would say would have been the key influences on me musically, and probably the things that are the strongest influences poetically. Elvis Costello as well, for a variety of reasons, probably because they used language, and represented the feelings I didn't feel confident enough to talk about at the time.

And I wanted to do that. The power they exercised in doing that, I thought was the best use of culture and I wanted to do it. I wanted to be Weller. I never wanted to be Joni Mitchell. There were no kaftans involved. I wanted the Lonsdale T-shirt, I wanted the walk onto stage in the Transglobal Express Tour. I wanted that kind of power, really, that I think was a male preserve.

I followed those influences poetically as well in the Liverpool poets, so Adrian Henri would have been important to me, because they were talking about life that I recognised, and in doing it they were elevating, lifting people, and I wanted a part of that as well. And because it was so musical too, so I felt I could live both lives as well. Probably the other biggest influence from the canon would be Shelley. The Mask of Anarchy still sort of towers over me really.

LP: I'd like to come back to politics briefly. I wanted your opinion on something that our fellow poet and friend the Brothers Grim, aka Chip, runs, Poetry on the Picket Line. For those of you listening who don't know, it's a really great thing. Chip gathers together a bunch of us poets to go down to picket lines and read some poetry and add a bit more atmosphere, or a different type of atmosphere I should say, to what's happening.

It's been a really lovely thing so far, combining poetry readings, and with that showing solidarity and having a presence there, adding another element to that. I wonder how you might see that that could progress, or other ways in which we as writers and artists can use our work to bring about change and actually do something real?

ND: It has been a really important thing for me to be involved in, alongside you. I think we both became involved at roughly the same time. I had baggage to bring to it because I think what Chip is doing is fusing two things at the point of actual struggle, so when workers are actually in dispute, bringing a performance to that environment, and lifting people, inspiring people, connecting with them, making solidarity with them.

For me, that is particularly meaningful. As an activist of long standing, you become very disillusioned. So I find I'm returning to the picket line, this time without a revolutionary paper, but with a piece of paper with a poem on it, so it's been incredibly meaningful for me. I think the potential in it is, again, to bring together two things that were very fused in the 80s, which is culture and political struggle.

There is a politics within the poetry scene and I see a real drive amongst young poets to testify, to make some kind of statement, but I think most of the time, those politics aren't connected with action in the external world. They are very private testimonies that are taking place, very individualised, often to do with self-actualisation, rather than revolutionary change in the world in any way. I think something like Poets on the Picket Line can feed back into that and bring a sense of how you can, as artists, help to inform struggle and learn from struggle. Picket lines are places where people's ideas change. I think often poets believe they have to preach to the converted. For me, that's the potential in it.

LP: That's a really lovely way of putting it. I was thinking as well, as people living in London, a place where we're seeing so much change at the moment, and so rapidly, and it's not all very nice, we're surrounded by people who are considering leaving, particularly a lot of young people. It's quite an important thing, to start thinking well maybe we should try and stick around and do something about it. It was a message that was in, I'll do a little shout-out here, I saw Paula Varjack's one-woman show a few nights ago, Show Me the Money, and that was one of the messages in that. About, what can we do as artists to actually use our work and make the changes we'd like to see happening? Anyway, perhaps we could have your final reading, and then we can wrap up with the last couple of questions.

ND: This is a longer piece, again it's about working class girls. Although it's not explicitly political, I think there's something in there about how those identities are formed, that I wanted to say.

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

LP: Wonderful, I love that poem. Thanks Nadia. So what are your aims for your work from now on?

ND: It's interesting. No, so much better than interesting. I'd like to get as much joy from writing and performing as I am at the moment. I'd like to feel that in some way, I'm challenging myself in what I do. I am aware of the absence of technique and form in the work I do and it haunts me, especially in your presence.

I don't know how to conceive of working on that without it killing any joy stone dead, but I would like to think that I was working hard and in a meaningful way to be a better poet and to deserve a place on a stage, where I often feel a fraud. I would like a dodgy 70s' transit van with a mattress in the back and to tour around really seamy venues, just gigging, as though I was perpetually 18 and in a band.

LP: That sounds perfect. That's good enough for me. If listeners want to find more of your work or to see you perform, where should they go?

ND: I will be performing next week, which I think is the 29th, at the launch of the Joe England Push magazine at the Horse and Stables. You can find that on Facebook, I think.

LP: I'm not sure when this will be going out so that may have passed already.

ND: Other than that, I had a piece that was on Peter Raynard's blog, Proletarian Poetry. I'd like to support what Peter does. It's just a start, but there's a little bit of me there.

LP: Thanks so much, Nadia, always a pleasure.

Part three:

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Agnes Török – **AT**

DT: Finally, it's me speaking to Agnes Török on the balcony of the Royal Festival Hall on the South Bank in London. Agnes was over for a mini tour of the UK from Sweden, playing a few spoken-word events and promoting her new book, which is out through Burning Eye Books. There are plenty of places online where you can check out Agnes' work and find out where she's gigging, all the links will be in the description and you can order her books through the Burning Eye website.

AT:

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

DT: Thank you. BBC Radio 3 are doing a takeover of the whole building so the music you can hear in the background is going out live on Radio 3. Maybe you could introduce yourself a bit first?

AT: Of course. My name is Agnes Török, or however you want to pronounce it. I am a Swedish-Scottish spoken word poet. My family is from Hungary, hence all the difficult pronunciations. I'm currently touring the UK with a book about mental health and happiness. I've been doing spoken wordy stuff for a long while now and I kind of love it.

DT: Your new book Happiness Is An Art Form is out through Burning Eye books.

AT: It is and it looks pretty.

DT: That's that bit out the way. You said before that you've been over to London to gig and do workshops quite a bit in the last year, is that a big part of your practice now?

AT: I think it's becoming a big part of my practice. I'm based in Sweden again after four years in Edinburgh. The UK and London spoken word scene is so exciting, there's so much fun stuff going on, I can't stay away. I keep being invited in to do things where I say, och, I shouldn't, I'll be busy that week, but yeah, I'll come for a day, or extend the tour so I can do a few extra things. I'm really loving seeing how much spoken word is blooming here and how much live events and diverse and varied sets of live events are part of that.

DT: What's the scene like in Sweden at the moment? If listeners go back in the archive, the second podcast I ever put out was recorded in Stockholm, with Olivia Bergdahl, Niklas Mesaros and Tswi Hlakotsa.

AT: I literally spoke to two of those three people earlier today! The scene is really exciting because a lot of things are happening. I think for me, who really started getting into spoken word first in South Africa and then in Scotland, it's quite a different scene. The big difference is that there are lots of institutions, theatres, schools and education-related institutions, that are really interested in backing it, but there's much less of an infrastructure.

I'm really excited to see all the exciting things that are happening and a lot are happening in Stockholm, but a lot outside as well. Olivia Bergdahl and Oskar Hanska are running an international spoken word club in Malmö and Gothenburg. There are things popping up and there's starting to be a real identity in the suburbs around Stockholm and Gothenburg, with Revolution Poetry. They're so cool.

I'm seeing a lot of really exciting things happening and I'm still in a place trying to figure out how I can add to that. A big difference compared to the UK scene, the London scene, the Scotland scene, is that there aren't massive arts cuts. There is a possibility to do these kinds of things and actually pay performers, have international guests and do these things that are becoming incredibly difficult in the UK scene. They were never particularly easy, but were certainly not made easier in the last few years. I have great hope for the Swedish scene.

DT: The popularity of spoken word seems to be nationwide. Because I lived In Norway, I sort of assumed it would follow the same model, that kind of spoken word thing, it's very Oslo-centric in Norway.

AT: Yeah, there's a few things in Bergen, but that's about it. I think that infrastructure that's been there over years is a big part of it. I've been at the World Poetry Slam Championships, I've been at the Scottish Poetry Slam Championships and it's a very big difference between the Swedish ones. All these other ones are based on a night or two and often in a pub or theatre.

In the Swedish slams, we've got poets from literally 12 different regions in the country, coming together and living together for four days, having coaches and teams, and there's all these things around it that make a big difference in creating this nationwide community that can interact and build off each other. Really exciting.

DT: Some people are going to want to shoot me for asking this question. What's the divide like between page and stage?

AT: It is a good question. As far as I understand in the UK and especially in Scotland, it's been a big debate and there's such a long literary history in places like Edinburgh and of live literature events that go back hundreds of years, but that are page-based. Then a resurgence in spoken word, poetry slam, where being off the page is a big merit. I don't think that divide is quite there in Sweden.

Partly I guess because the literary history and traditions are different, but also poetry slams today, there's not this huge emphasis on being off the page, on it being theatrical or dramatic or performed. I think it's less of an issue there, but there is also a bigger discussion about how to mix it with other art forms. I'm seeing a lot of interesting things happening in London with spoken word theatre, a lot happening around Roundhouse, where there's a lot of fusion of art forms.

I'm working with Tongue Fu later today, which is fusing spoken word and music. I think there's a similar fusion going on in Sweden, only there's no difference between when you're fusing page poetry, performed or not, and poetry that's written to be performed. So I think there's less of a divide, but in quite an exciting way. It opens up other possibilities to collaborate with other art forms.

DT: I suppose the next question would be relating to how you develop your own work. Is there much of a conversation between poets in Sweden publicly? I'll tell you why, I'm thinking about having an episode discussing the growth of collectives, poetry collectives, especially in cities in this country. I was wondering, is there a similar set-up in Sweden or is it still a bit more lonely?

AT: Well, I hope it's not lonely. But there are definitely fewer poetry collectives I think. Revolution Poetry and Förenade Förorter, or United Suburbs, have been the main team and they've organised as a team and there have been a lot of collaborative shows. As far as I've seen, that's not happened on a bigger scale otherwise. There are some secret projects in the works that I won't talk too much about at the moment but that involves a new poetry collaboration in Sweden.

Generally, there is less focus on that. Also I think because there is not the equivalent of spoken-word festivals. The Swedish scene doesn't have the equivalent of Edinburgh Fringe. It doesn't have the equivalent of a spoken word theatre like Roundhouse and so there is not a lot of focus on putting together longer shows, rather putting on things like open mics, poetry slams, where there is not the same space for collaborative work. I'm excited to see where we might end up with that.

DT: It's interesting isn't it because, as you mentioned earlier, you've got places like MDT in Stockholm where you get a crossover, but you're right, there's no... you don't have the same dedicated theatre spaces that we do in London. But it'll be interesting to see how it develops. How important is conversation with other writers to you, in the development of your work?

AT: Crucial. I don't think I would ever come up with ideas that I feel are polished and worthwhile and prepared for an audience unless I had that conversation with other people. I talk about having poetry partners. I have a poetry wife in Edinburgh who I run all my poetry business by. She gives me feedback and can be as brutally honest as she likes and it tends to work out great because we have that conversation.

And similarly I have that conversation with poets based in London and in Stockholm, it's really key. What I'm finding now as I'm starting to write poetry and spoken word in Swedish for the

first time in five, six years, is that I'm getting to a point where I'm looking at new ways to collaborate with people and get feedback, because the people I've been relying on for feedback and conversation about new pieces don't speak that language.

DT: I'd like to talk more about the language that you write in in a moment, but we'll take a second reading before we do that.

AT: Absolutely. I've been thinking a lot about happiness and mental health and writing this book and touring a show on the same topic. I came up with this poem about how I think we're mostly told about how happiness should be.

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

DT: Thank you very much. It's funny you should read that, I was on the bus at 7 o'clock this morning, going to a poetry breakfast, and I must have seen an advertisement, I can't remember what it was, but it sparked off in my mind this idea, I was thinking of the pressure we're all under to be happy. I might have imagined in my head someone saying 'oh it must make you really happy that you get to go to see poetry for breakfast' and at that point I wasn't feeling great, I was really tired. Anyway thanks for reading!

You mentioned you've just started writing in Swedish again recently. That was something I wanted to talk about, I noticed in Stockholm that a lot of the spoken word stuff was in English. Do you think a lot of people are under pressure, in a sort of career sense, to write in English in Sweden?

AT: I hope not. I think I struggle to imagine that because I only really got into spoken word once I'd moved, I hadn't done much. According to the most recent research, Swedish people have the highest level of English-speaking ability of any non-native language speakers in the world. And I think it means, you know, Swedish people tend to have this huge access to English-speaking culture, whether that's from the UK, or the US, Australia, India, South Africa.

It tends to mean that so much of the culture we consume, whether that's TV, films, music and spoken word, tends to be in that language. It's not necessarily a pressure to do spoken word and poetry in English for your career, so much as that's where your influences are coming from, that's who you start out mimicking, because that's who you're impressed by.

Before I knew anything about Swedish poetry, I was head over heels in love with Sarah Kay's poetry, so I wanted to write it, but you can't really do that in Swedish because there is something about the language melody that doesn't quite match with her style. I hope there's less of a pressure to write in English for a career's sake, and more of an interest in exploring what that language can do that the Swedish language doesn't do as well, and vice versa.

DT: I think that's definitely a very fair point, about the influences there, and that was something I wanted to talk about as well. Because obviously your YouTube channel is a big part of your practice and self-promotion. I think I would still argue though that your inspirations and influences are still connected to career pressures. I suppose most people who listen to this who are continuing to perform spoken word and want to make money out of it

in some way would like to be more professional in order to dedicate more time to it. If you're then looking at examples of ways to do that, most of those examples probably only exist in English, don't they?

AT: Absolutely. That's perfectly true. Generally, comparing a language to Swedish, which has between nine and 10 million speakers, maybe 11 if you count some Finland-based people who speak Swedish as first language, Norwegians and Danish who understand it perfectly, we're still talking under 15 million people who could possibly understand you.

Even if every single one of them was into what you do, that's fewer YouTube followers than some English-speaking poets have. Moving to Sweden and doing things in Swedish, what I do online will still be in English, partly because that's where some of the people who are interested in my work are, and that's what they speak.

You're right in saying there's a pressure, but I think it comes more from a place of wanting to reach people, rather than wanting to achieve lots of things. I still think, with one or two exceptions, there are no poetry millionaires. None of us are in this for the money.

DT: Oh no, when I say career, I don't necessarily mean people chasing money, because you're not going to get that from poetry anyway. You can think of your career as an attempt to reach the most people, and not think of it in financial terms.

AT: Absolutely and because Sweden is also a place that speaks English so broadly and so well, generally you don't lose audiences in Sweden for speaking English in your poetry, and writing, performing and marketing yourself in English. But you do lose a huge audience by only choosing Swedish. So yeah, I think you're right about that.

DT: How has it been writing in Swedish again? Have you found that you're limited or has it opened opportunities for you?

AT: So far, I'm not showing it to anyone, so there are no opportunities to gain. I'm very much trying to work through it on my own. There are issues and subject matter that I'm finding it easier to write about in English and some in Swedish. I think sometimes I've thought of writing in English as a very comfortable barrier between myself and my work, in that no matter how personal the subject matter is, the way I think about it is usually not in the language I experience those things in or think about or process those things in.

So there is always this very comfortable distance between something very personal that I'm reading out in front of people who might criticise it to pieces, and then the actual experience, which is mine and which is in Swedish. That barrier is removed when I start writing in Swedish. It is challenging, it's also a lot of fun. The Swedish language makes for a lot of interesting ways to play with the way words and sentences are put together and that has led to some really cool things. I'm excited about it, but I am much less sure of my own ability to write something that makes sense to anyone else in Swedish.

DT: You've got a lot of stuff on YouTube. Do you film yourself or work with others?

AT: Both. It depends how big the project is, how much time and money and resource I have to dedicate to it. As a rule, I try to make sure anyone I collaborate with, if there's money involved at any stage, they always get paid. Right now, I'm crowdfunding all my videos, I release one every month. Occasionally, I make a bigger one, so at the start of September, I released a big video that garnered 200,000 views and we knew it was a video that might speak to a lot of people and we wanted to make it really well-produced, really nicely put together.

We wanted to do a big release for it and spread the message, which was about online harassment and abuse of women. We wanted to spread that message as far as we could. With that, I worked with Dangerous Women project and with a videographer called Josie Teng who was fantastic. She did a lot of the actual work. I wrote the poem, a lot of the rest was her. She's amazing.

Then for the video that I released a few days back, at the start of September, it was literally me, my laptop and my book. I had a bit of a chat with the camera then it went live. It was much smaller-scale poems, not a big message I wanted to reach as many people with, just, this is a nice poem, I want to share with you. For different types of projects, there are different levels of engagement that you're wanting to do there, and different amounts of time and money that you can spend on it.

I would love to be the kind of person who can magically put together a fantastically, beautifully edited video on my own. I normally don't have the time or the skills to do that, but when I've written something where I go, actually, this needs something better than my skills...

DT: I think actually it's a nice message, because I think often with poetry and spoken word stuff, when you do see a film version of it, often it isn't considered enough and I think it's an important message that people should think more about the message of the piece and what that demands in terms of film. And sometimes, something shot on your iPhone is enough, but sometimes you need a slightly bigger production value. You said you're crowdfunding, how exactly are you doing that?

AT: There's a website called Patreon. You pledge every month to something and in exchange, you get something you back every month. Rather than crowdfunding to reach a certain goal, to release a one-off thing like a CD or book, it's essentially people saying, I will pledge one dollar or $50 a month and in exchange, they get to see the videos I release first, and it's entirely funded by the money they put into it.

When I'm doing something particularly exciting, like now I'm on tour, this tour is entirely funded by them, I will give them updates along the way, say I did this, or today I'm ill, I'm in bed and feeling sorry for myself and tell me to drink some tea. There's the whole spectrum there, and a lot of personal engagement. But essentially you can crowdfund particular projects, I choose to crowdfund on a regular basis instead. It's not quite at the point where it covers my rent or living expenses, but it does cover the cost of producing the videos that I do and it allows me to pay all the people involved. Often, it involves me being able to pay myself at least a little bit as well.

DT: We'll put a link to the Patreon page, along with your website. We have time for one more reading.

AT: This is about why art is so key for mental health. It's called The Heart is a Muscle.

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

DT: Thank you for joining us, Agnes.

End of transcript.