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NB: Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today.

The following was recorded at Free Word, on the 23rd of October 2019, for Being a Writer: an Interactive Forum—a TLC event in association with the Royal Society of Literature. In this podcast, poet and author of *The Black Flamingo*, Dead Atta speaks to the theme ‘A Nest of One’s Own’, on how he finds networks, community and emotional support. It is now available here, on Being a Writer.

DA [00:00:58]: Good evening, everyone. Okay, so, my name’s Dean Atta, and I’m here to talk to you about A Nest of One’s Own. And I love this, Aki gave me the title and I’m really happy for it, because it really fits with what I’ve been about my whole career. We think, okay, a nest is comfortable, cosy, but you fly the nest. And so, so many times I’ve been involved with groups and projects and collectives, and, eventually, it comes to an end and it’s time to move on, and I think sometimes it’s really good to know when that time has come.

As Nathalie said at the end of her presentation, there’s a lot of peer support you can get as a writer, and I think that’s something I’ve really sought out throughout my career. Because writing can be really lonely, but it doesn’t have to be, and depending on where you are living, or your life circumstances, maybe it’s harder to meet up with people, but there are ways you can do some of the things I am talking about online as well.

So, I’m going to go through some of the collectives and groups I’ve been part of, and also tell you what was good about them and what was challenging about them. You may recognise some faces as I go through, but that is kind of by-the-by. [because] it’s more about the experiences than the individual people that were involved.

I was a very lonely writer, until I joined the Roundhouse Poetry Collective. For me, that was a breakthrough, because I realised you didn’t have to do this on your own. You could workshop your writing. You could work with other writers, and show early drafts to people. It didn’t have to be going to the slam with your final poem, or sending of to publication[s] and not hearing anything back. You could show people your work in progress.

This group was essential for me; the first experience I had of people with whom I could write, workshop and perform together and support each other through our careers. We were in the Roundhouse Poetry Collective, and when that time came to an end, we formed a collective of our own, and named ourselves Rubix. We had a really interesting time, because we wanted to be a collective, so there was no leader. There was no organisation. We kind of just did things as and when we could, [and] we did some really fun things. We went to the Edinburgh Fridge Festival, and took a show up there. We did some shows around London, particularly at the Roundhouse, because we’d come from there, and we released an album, called *Red*, on Roundhouse Records. Roundhouse had a record label, and we did a spoken word album on there. Our idea was that we were going to do six colours to represent the rubix cube, [but] we just did the one. And that was because there was no organisation to it. We were just young poets who wanted to be together, and do some shows and record an album, and we did it, and it was wonderful.

We drifted off and did our own things, and it was painful because it took a while for us to realise it was over. It was a while [that] we still thought we were in this collective, but we hadn’t met in three months and no one was replying to the emails, so that was an experience where I [thought] this doesn’t have any parameters. We were doing all these things just because we wanted to do them.

Then, I got involved with Point Blank Poets, and we came together because we wanted to, as a collective, still maintain individual voices and do shows, but be paid for them. It was quite a fun time to be part of a collective, because each of us had things going on in our careers, so when we came together, we felt like The Avengers. We would come together and we were doing things together and it was really powerful. We didn’t do lots, [but] it was really important for me [because] we wrote together, we workshopped together and we did some shows.

I eventually put together a collection of poetry, and that was a shift for me, because I was doing spoken word and I hadn’t really thought about publishing, but when I wrote a poem called *I am Nobody’s Nigger*, I got approached by publishers to put a book together. That was a turning point, because I saw different doors open up. There is a page and stage divide, still now. People still go on about it, and it comes up over and over again. And so, once I was published writer, things felt quite different, [but] I was aware of who I wanted around me still, because when you have your book, it’s all about you. But I didn’t really like that. Apart from at my book launch, I didn’t really like all of the attention on me, so I found other black, queer writers that I wanted to spend time with, and do launches together.

My book was published by a publisher called Saqi Books, but at the time, Yrsa Daley-Ward and Keith Jarrett had self-published books, and it was harder for them to get bookshop readings, and it was harder for them to get programmed to do things. Obviously, we’ve seen Yrsa’s huge now, and Keith is incredible, but at the time, things were different doing gigs alongside each other, [which] gave me a real feeling of [having] a community, I’m not alone in this still. And then I was published in an anthology called *Black and Gay in the UK*, and that kind of planted a seed that’s grown to this present day, of working with black queer writers.

I was pleased to be in the anthology, obviously, but what was most important to me was this community. Having other writers with similar life experiences. There was something really unique and special about that for me. I started an event with Deanna Rodger called Come Rhyme with Me, and this has being going on and off since 2010, and I say on and off because we don’t do it all the time. When we want to take a break, we stop, and I think, [for] some collaborations, that could be learned from, [because] sometimes you’re doing things and it’s going well, but it’s to the detriment of other things in your life. For us, Come Rhyme with Me was really important at the time that we started it. In 2010, there weren’t spoken word nights that we were particular interested to go to, so we started our own, and we had the opportunity to programme lots of amazing poets, and make connections abroad in other cities. We went to Canada with it. We did shows in Brighton and Birmingham, all over the country. People started to learn it was happening, and would contact us when they were touring the UK; when poets were coming to the UK.

One of the downsides, I think, of being a spoken word programmer, is that in that arena there’s a sense of, if I book you, will you book me? and so sometimes people would say, ‘It’d be great to do Come Rhyme with Me, and we’ll get you on X show’, and that was [meant] you saw that people who were programming events were doing lots of events. They programme each other to get a show, and that could be said of a lot of areas within industries like ours.

I was also part of Keats House Poets Collective, and that’s an ongoing and less committed affiliation with Keats House. We do open mics there and workshops there that are free and accessible, and we have residency periods and we write poems in response to the work of John Keats, which is really fun for me (I have the same birthday as him, which is Brexit day, Halloween).

Deanna pops up in quite a few of the groups I’m in, and that’s no coincidence because we really have an affinity and get a long, so that friend within everyone else—we are colleagues, but there are friends within that, like Nathalie was distinguishing between mentors and friends, you have colleagues and friends, as writers. And it’s okay for them, or even yourself, to make that distinction sometimes. I’ve ruffled feathers that way, but I like to make it clear to everyone around me.

Spoken Word Educators was a programme I did when I a bit stuck, and had this amazing opportunity presented to me, to learn to be a spoken word educator; to go into schools and do workshops with young people. I was already doing that, but I hadn’t had any training in it. People were just kind of like, you can do poetry, come into our school. But I did this programme, and made an incredible bunch of friends, actually, in this group. We had an amazing experience because we were doing a placement in school, and doing workshops at Goldsmiths University with a poet called Peter Kahn, who gave us mentoring. That was a really intense kind of mentoring, both on our writing and our education work. And that was my first real experience of mentoring, and it really did transform me, I think.

I got to take on a mentoring role after that, with the Mouthy Poets, in Nottingham, which was fun for me because it was a different city. I wasn’t involved in the politics of their poetry scene, or their spoken word scene, and I got to come in a do some workshops. So many of the poets in that group were queer, but they didn’t feel there was a space for them to express that, so I set about to do a project called The Queer Zine, and we did that and launched it at Nottingham Pride, and it provided an opportunity for those writers to express themselves and be seen within their collective. Some of them used the zine launch as a way to come out to friends and family as well, so, for me, that felt like a really important thing do, to provide a space for others. I was invited to do one thing, just run workshops about craft, but [I found that] in here there’s this unspoken queerness going on that’s not being expressed. How can I bring that to the fore? That opportunity was welcome to explore.

Malika’s Poetry kitchen was a place for me that was like a mythological creature. For so many years I had heard about Malika’s Poetry Kitchen, and so many of the poets in it are incredible, and I was waiting. I didn’t know if you could ask to be invited, I didn’t know how it worked. And then, one day, I got offered an invited, and I joined the group. But, I realised it’s a group of poets, just figuring things out. I think sometimes, when we see groups and we see collectives or we see people having their meetings, we think they know something we don’t. they know what they know, but everyone’s figuring it out together. This is a non-hierarchical group that comes together. We run workshops for each other. We support each other in other ways. It’s [an] amazing sense of workshopping poems and giving each other critique, but that can be done with any group of writers who come together and seriously want to do it. And I think, sometimes, you’re waiting to get let into that group or this group, when actually you could start a group. And I’ve often, in the meantime, set about finding a group of poets and just having meetings, when I wasn’t in Malika’s Kitchen, or when I wasn’t doing something in a group of poets, just like, who do I know that I want to get together with? And I just sometimes self-organised workshops, and get-togethers, and I think that’s something within everyone’s power to do.

Then, I started doing drag, which was a bit of a curve ball. But, it actually turned out to be incredible research. I started to realise, in drag, it’s not different to in writing. You need people around you to tell you when your makeup’s a mess, to lend you some outfits, to help you rehearse your performance or to give you that critique that no one else is going to give you, because they will just say, ‘You were fabulous darling,’ but actually, you could have done better. I had a wonderful experience doing that, and it gave me an opportunity to express creativity in another way, and it was inspiration for the book that came.

I started doing a residency with an artist called Ben Connors, at the Tate, and it was a place where I could come and write, and then Ben was doing a mural inspired by what I was writing, which was The Black Flamingo, my metaphor at the moment. And friends would come in and sit with me and give me advice, and I would show them what I was writing. It was open to the public, and we’d often have groups of kids in there writing with us, we’d have people literally standing behind my desk, watching me write poems. It was terrifying! And we’d have this big group there, this French group of students. I wanted to read them my poetry, most of them didn’t understand it so they just watched Ben draw on the wall. That was really fun. It was a new experience for me, just putting our process son show. Me and Ben completed that residency, Ben made his mural based on my writing and we made a zine based on writing and drawings from visitors to the gallery, which was really fun.

After that, we did performances with queer writers. I got into drag again, and invited people along to come and see. And that’s the thing: people come and go and merge with your life at different times, and this was really important to bring together, for me—black queer writers. That’s been my focus. [I] put together what I thought was a finished, publishable collection of poetry with illustrations, found that most publishers don’t want to publish an adult poetry collection with illustrations, so put that to the side for a while and tried to figure out what I was going o do with it.

In the meantime, I set up project in Brighton called The Writers’ Place Poets, which was mentoring writers down in Brighton. There were actually 12 of them, [and] we published a pamphlet. Then, in the following year [I] worked in First Story, which was an opportunity for me to work with schools and young people and get them to publish their work, and was ambassador for National Writing Day. [It] was really important for me to see that everyone can write, and National Writing Day was a really big moment, in terms of online and in-the-world people getting involved in things, doing workshops in schools. It was really fantastic.

But, for me, it was about also publishing my own work not just helping people publish theirs. There’s that balance that I try and find, because I get paid to go into schools, and I get paid to go and do workshops, but until your work is selling, you don’t get paid to write anything, a lot of the time. I wanted to keep writing and keep teaching and keep mentoring. [I was] published in this anthology called *Proud*, [and] helped to edit these two books, but, eventually, it came back to *The Black Flamingo*. It was a really difficult thing that happened for me with that, because I had built a community around the book, which included the illustrator, and found out… [that] publishers don’t tend to take writers and illustrators together. And so I found out that they were going to take the words from *The Black Flamingo* and they wanted to reshape it into a young adult book, which was really exciting because I had been doing a lot of work with young people, but it meant that it came to an end, the relationship with the illustrator. That was really tricky, and that was really a difficult time to think about my career versus my community and friendships with people. When you’re collaborating and you make friends with people you’re collaborating with, it was like a separation. I’ve never bene divorced so I don’t know if it was like that, but it was hard, to the extent [that] when they picked a new illustrator, I didn’t want to meet them. We pretty much didn’t meet until the launch of the book. [But, I have] really important team members [now]: my agent, my editor, the lovely illustrator and designer and publicist. I’ve never had a publicist before, so I never knew. These are new relationships that I’ve never had before, [and] I had to take the skills I learnt working with other people in collectives, working with other people as collaborators, and figuring out, you know, your agent has your best intentions at heart but also they want make money, your editor knows their market and you know your writing and you have to find that balance. An illustrator wants to do their job as much as you want to do your job. A designer and a publicist know what your work can do, but you have to trust them to do that with it.

So, being a writer isn’t about sitting down on your own and writing a book. There’re so many people you’re going to have to work with. I think one of the best [pieces] of advice I got give [by] my drag mother, when I was doing drag, was don’t be a dick. And I think that transfers across to writing. If you are nice to people, if you part ways amicably, if you figure things out, when things need to be worked out, with a good heart, you’re going to keep working with people as time goes by. But if you’re a dick, you’re not. And I think that’s the biggest lesson.

Now, I’m in the world meeting young adult writers, which is a new group of people, and I feel like I’m in a new tribe, just to the left of poetry, working with children’s writing. It’s been really fun, and I’ve been doing cabaret performances around the book, bringing back some of the people I’ve been working with before, to join in *The Black Flamingo* cabaret (the first one happened in this very room). And it’s been wonderful, but I think in amongst all that, I’s exhausting. You think, [when] you’re a freelancer you work on your own, [but] you work with so many people, and I think that’s the strange thing about writing. You think it’s a solitary job, and in the end you’re working with so many people all the time. So, for me, self-care is really, really important. I do yoga, I meditate, I spend time with my nieces and I spend time with my friends, some of whom are poets, and some of whom are not.

We have to figure it out for ourselves. I wanted to come here and say, this is the way to do it, but as I was putting these slides together, I was also realising things I’d left out, things I could overemphasise or underemphasise, the people who’ve influenced me that weren’t official mentors, but gave me advice and support along the way. The people that have steered me in the right direction gently. There are people who you acknowledge in a tangible way, and I think that’s a lot of the peers that I have. As we’ve progressed, you kind of stick together and you figure things out together. Peer support is really important. You can’t do it on your own, and don’t try.

Thank you.