

**Penumbra Online Podcast Interview: Hosted By Bo Locke and
Hannah Neeley, Featuring Michelle Moraa**

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Neeley.**

Bo: Hello! And Welcome to our first edition of the Penumbra Podcast. Thank you for joining us today. I am Bo Locke. I'm the Non-fiction Editor and one of the podcast producers.

Hannah: My name is Hannah Neeley, and I am the Reviews Editor for Penumbra and one of the podcast producers.

B: And our guest here is Michelle Moraa. She's an undergrad student at University of Maryland, and she's a poet more importantly. Hi Michelle-do you want to introduce yourself?

Michelle: Yeah! Hi, I'm Michelle. I'm a junior at the University of Maryland and I am a poet though that is not what I study. I study Government and Politics at UMD.

B: That's really interesting. So, is poetry more of a hobby for you or is that something that you've always been passionate about, but you didn't want to make a career out of it?

M: It's something that I've always loved doing but I never, I guess, realistically saw something that I can make a career out of. But in school I have started taking courses in creative writing specified in poetry. So, it's been fun!

B: That's good. Yeah, I was kinda in the same boat. I like writing silly little fiction stories, but I've never been serious enough. My stories almost always end in a pun, so I never really made an academic-I've never been an academic creative writer, I guess I'll say.

H: So, Michelle, what kind of poetry do you like to write or what do you like to read? What influences you?

M: So, I guess my favorite form of poetry for the longest time was slam poetry. My freshman year of high school-

H: Oh, I love that too!

M: I know! Slam Poetry was like all I watched when I first got into it. We had an assignment my freshman year of high school where we had to write a slam poem and present and perform it in front of our class. And my teacher was asking us to research it, so she was just like just go on YouTube and just look up slam poetry. I think I watched 40 videos. (laughs)

H: They're addicting!

M: They're so addicting! And poetry to me up to that point wasn't performative, so I was really really interested by that and it was really new to me. But that's the type of poetry that I like to write, as poetry that I can perform. Maybe not necessarily slam poetry but just poetry that's driven by my emotion and the writing style and things like that.

H: Have you gotten to perform any slam poetry?

M: I have not. I kept chickening out at school every time there was an open mic. (laughs)

H: It's intense.

M: It is!

B: I get that. I kind of feel like academia leaves us behind in that aspect at least in High School. Like your teacher unfortunately pointed you in that direction, but otherwise I feel like we just study the very dry poems like Walt Whitman and, you know, Shakespeare Sonnets which you know are good poems, but it doesn't really elicit that emotion like you were talking about.

M: Yeah, no, I agree. I think that it's funny you mention that because I distinctly remember. I think I was in fourth or fifth grade and we're asked to write a poem. And when I asked my teacher what a poem was, I remember she said, "Oh it's something that rhymes." That was all she said. I don't know, you said that and I was like, "yeah!" I remember being told that poetry is just a rhyming sequence. I was like, "Oh, I guess." But it's not.

H: That includes a lot of things. (laughs)

B: Oh, that's funny. So, what kind of projects are you working on currently poetry-wise? Do you have any long-form projects or do you normally stick with short, single sessions of writing?

M: I normally do stick with short, single sessions of writing. I have a lot of like random notes in my notes app on my phone where I'll just be like, "Oh! This is cool." And then for a week or so I'll get locked in on writing. But right now actually, I am working on something. I'm working on a collection-the very first one I've ever written, so I don't have very high expectations for it.

B: That's further than most people.

M: Yeah, I actually decided to do it not too long ago. This collection is focused on my lineage and my culture which is something that I got really into researching this summer. So, I was writing a poem about my lineage and my professor just offhandedly remarked. She was like, "Oh this would be such a good poem in a collection." And I was like, "Yeah it would." So, I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to write a collection."

B: How long is your collection going to be? Is it a chapbook like 20 pages or so?

M: I have no idea. Right now I think so. I'm just researching the basics of what makes a collection. Actually in the poetry workshop class that I'm in now, we're actually doing a collections project where we have to take an already written collection and dive into it and dissect it, figure out the history of the poet, the history of the writing, things like that. I hope that that process also helps me when I'm writing.

H: What poetry collection are you looking at for that class?

M: Native Guard by Natasha Trethewey.

H: Ok, are you hoping that she influences some of your poems?

M: Yeah no yeah. I just got introduced to her as a poet this semester, and I love her poetry. I more so love how her poetry is defined because she doesn't necessarily define her poetry for other people, but it's almost as if her poetry defines itself. And like reading a lot of her poetry it's very much similar to what I want to write, which is about history and culture though hers is more so about African American history

and African American culture specifically. The way she writes isn't something that points to her identity, but that's something that is representative of her identity which I really enjoy.

H: Very cool.

B: Are you going to try and publish it? Or is it more just a personal project?

M: I want to publish it. It will be a personal project for a bit. We'll see. I have always wanted to publish something - I actually thought I was going to publish a book. I dabbled in fiction for a little bit, but that wasn't - I was really intimidated by it, I guess, for a lack of better explanation. I think I would like to publish this collection.

B: Cool. Are you going to try to go through a traditional publisher or maybe self-publish? Have you thought about that yet?

M: I'm actually learning about the publishing process right now in my course. Self-publishing was something that sounded really interesting. I'm learning about the logistics of publishing through a big publisher, and there's a lot of direction that's needed. I really like the freedom that comes with self-publishing.

B: Yeah, I feel like with big publishers you get hemmed in by deadlines and demands. You need to have - I mean for stories it's like you need to have this many chapters by this date. For poetry I'd imagine it'd be like, have 50% of the collection done by this date. It just puts the pressure on there. I feel like for some people that's good, but for a lot it's just stifling the creative process where it's like, now you're writing something just to meet a deadline rather than writing it when you're feeling like it.

M: Oh no, I agree. I'm also not a person that does well on deadlines. It very much looms over me.

B: I'm the same way. I like it for school because it finally gets me to write, but anything creative - no deadlines, they stress me out. I feel like the first half - like whenever I wrote short stories for class - the first half is really good and then the second half is rushed just to make sure it's on time.

H: When you go to write poetry, since you are not a deadline person - that doesn't inspire you - what kind of things do you like to do to get yourself in the writing space?

M: I'm very much a person who likes cozy spaces, so I'll either be in my room or when things were open I'd go to the library at my school and get a little nook. I really like drinking tea. I don't know if it's like I've conditioned myself now, but I write the best whenever I have a cup of tea. *(laughs)* But it's mainly whenever I'm somewhere where I feel comfortable, I think I write the best. It also really inspires me. When I was at school I found myself writing a lot about the things that were happening around me, even if it wasn't directly. I was writing a lot more about other people or my classes that I was really interested in. Now that I'm home, I'm writing about being home and writing about family and things like that.

H: That's really cool. Using your outside experiences to help inspire you to write instead of having to pull from maybe whatever you're thinking about at the moment.

M: Yeah, I sometimes will write from thought process or whatever I'm thinking about, but I find I don't like those poems usually because they're not polished, I guess for a lack of a better term. Sometimes it's like, oh this is more of a rant or just writing for venting or frustration, but the poetry I feel that I can write to share, I write in those spaces.

H: Very cool.

B: That makes a lot of sense. When you're writing in those spaces your current emotions and state of mind, but I feel if you're writing from just your thought process everything's interfering with that, everything that's going on, you're getting some of the negative influences of what's going on perhaps. I mean, I know that's how it is when I write. I tend to overthink it.

M: Oh yeah, I overthink it. Or sometimes I'll unintentionally project. So I guess in that sense - I study government and politics, and sometimes when I get really frustrated in my studies I'm like, "Oh maybe I should write about this." But then in writing I'm just like, this is not enjoyable because I'm just angry but in a space where I don't want to be.

B: Yeah, I just imagine you reading a poem you wrote a couple months ago and you're like, "Why is this poem so angry?" And then you look at the news from that week and you're like, "Ohh, that's why." (*laughs*)

M: (*laughs*) Yeah!

H: Does your government and politics background and focus in your studies influence what you write about? Not necessarily from the venting/frustration point but the information you're taking in.

M: Yeah, I would say so. I would say more so with my minors. I'm also studying Black Women's Studies and Global Terrorism as my minors. Very intense. So I think that I take more so from a lot of the cultural pieces that I read. I do a lot of reading in classes, and one thing that I found in my Global Terrorism and Black Women's Studies courses specifically is that there's a lot of heritage and culture ingrained within the lessons that we learn. With Black Women's Studies it's more so about American history, but also about Black dominated nations like the Caribbean and Black nations in Africa. And in my Global Terrorism class I'm learning a lot about Islamic cultures and cultures in the Middle East. I kind of will take from that. Maybe not specifically from my courses, but from what I learn from them and things that will intrigue me.

H: So is there a current poem that you're working on right now that you'd be willing to tell us about?

M: Kind of! So, I have an assignment coming up for a workshop that I have to write for. I was thinking of what I wanted to write. I'm trying to - in relation to our conversation a little earlier - bridge the gap between my frustration and the world climate and write about it in a way that's representative of not only how I feel but how I want it to look on a page. So, right now I'm working on a piece specifically about police brutality which has been really tentative. I will start writing it and feel, no that's terrible and I'll delete it. (*laughs*) Yeah, that's what I'm working on right now.

B: I had one question. I'm not too familiar with poetry. Obviously I've read some, but you're talking about the formatting, how you want it to look on a page. I know that's a big aspect of poetry I'm really not familiar with, because I would always just left-align everything, trying to make the lines mostly even. Could you talk about that a bit, aesthetically what you're trying to do on a page?

M: Yeah, so to me emotion in poetry is also portrayed in how the words take up space on the page. So, one thing that I started doing a lot more recent - actually this year I would say - is that I started playing with moving the words along the page. So, I really enjoy when specific things like important things will take up a certain part and they'll be something that I'll feel like maybe this isn't necessarily important to this context but it's important to the piece as a whole. I'll move the page into that part. So it's like, to me the way I write my poetry it's like every part is kind of important on its own, but also important to the poem as a collective. That's how I move the poem across the page. I try and see does this fit into this stanza? If it doesn't, does this fit into this line? If it doesn't fit into this line, then does it fit into this space? If it doesn't fit into this space, where does it fit? That's how my thought process goes.

B: That's super interesting to me because that's something I'm unfamiliar with. I've noticed that in poems when they're differently aligned. It does look different than just everything left-aligned. I think I'd be a terrible poet for that. (*M laughs*) I'd probably stick to the exact same rhyme scheme and meter and everything would be like 10 words or 10 syllables. I would just be very much traditionalist, but I'm not a poetry writer at all. I like reading it, but the writing of it eludes me.

M: That's actually the thing that I found the most fun in these workshops that I'm taking is I'm also - I'm really comfortable in writing narrative poems. I really like long, heavy, intense poems and a lot of my poetry workshop professors will be like, "Let's, let's not do that." But I'm like, this is comfortable. (*laughs*) Moving along the page is something that I just started doing that I found that I really like. But yeah no, there's so much more to poetry than people know and than people understand and even something that's like four lines, it's one stanza, can have so much technique attached to it which I think is a really cool thing about poetry.

B: Yeah, it's very deep.

H: And it's cool for a reader too because someone who maybe doesn't know anything about poetry and then someone who knows it really well - those specific line breaks or the way you structure it aesthetically tells the reader where they're supposed to focus. Or for a reader who may not be knowledgeable about the subject, they know where the important piece is. For me, I appreciate that when I'm reading poetry. Because sometimes, I'm like, I don't know, really know what's supposed to be going on here, (*B and M laugh*) but that's important, so I'm going to focus on that.

M: I like that, especially with older poetry. Language in old poetry is something that I struggle with a lot, so I appreciate that too.

H: Yeah, some of the older poetry pieces we've had to read for classes - I'm trying to appreciate it and get what they're supposed to be communicating, but sometimes - especially when they invert some of the sentence structures - I'm lost. Oh my goodness. I do appreciate modern poetry for its, I don't know, maybe more familiar language, but also because I think they play with aesthetic style a little bit more than some of the older stuff.

B: I think they're more willing to experiment. But then again, I also think that's kind of confirmation bias because back in the day, maybe these people were experimental, but they were so good they were the ones that stood the test of time.

H: That's true!

B: Like look at these old poets we learn about. Right now, me and Hannah are in an English poetry class - British poetry class excuse me. I mean, we're learning probably about 20-30 different poets, but those are probably the 20-30 best poets of that time. You had to know there must have been hundreds if not thousands of them writing back then. So is it kind of like. Is it confirmation bias? Who decided on what was the canon of the time? I feel like that might be the spot we're in right now. We think of music from like the 50's and it's very specific aesthetic, but there was such a wide variety. Some of them were just more popular and some have fallen by the wayside.

M: That's really interesting because we do a lot of reading - well not a lot, we did like 4. We did 4 readings of old poets and articles they've written about what they considered to be poetry. We did one by Natasha Tretheway who is the person I'm doing my collection on. We also did Frost? What was his name?

B: We'll say Mr. Frost!

M: *(laughs)* Yeah, but my professor basically picked poets from revolutionary times in poetry and what changed for them. I remember Natasha Tretheway was writing about identity and writing about identity was something that's new in poetry for her, but I remember reading that someone saying that poetry that focuses more so on the aesthetic of the poem and not the language of the poem is not true poetry. So I think it is really interesting how many - and these were really big poets - I'll find this and send it. *(laughs)* But these are really, really big poets of their

time and poets who were poet laureates and things like that. So it's interesting to see what is poetry now, and if people from a hundred years ago read it whether or not they would consider it to be poetry.

H: That's a great point. I took a French poetry class for my French undergrad, and we were talking about poetry and Dadaism and the chaotic sense of that. There was an offshoot where they put together poems based off of mathematical equations. So the words themselves were picked because they were like the third letter of the alphabet or it could be all sorts of things that were basically gibberish. But it was a poem. So some people were like, oh yeah that's poetry just including a mathematical sense, but maybe somebody who's maybe very strict to form says, "That is not poetry. That has no meaning." It's very cool to see how it changes across cultures and across time.

M: Robert Frost! Sorry, I found it. It was Robert Frost. *(laughs)* But that's really interesting.

H: Although I'm sure you're probably not doing your poetry collection in mathematical formulas with your poems *(H and M laugh)*.

B: Yeah, that's a bit out there, but it would be interesting to read I think. I feel like if you're not mathematically inclined or poetry inclined, you'd probably read it and just close the book and put it away forever. *(M laughs)* Like I don't need to read this.

H: I'm pretty sure some of my classmates did that. *(B laughs)*

B: Like I'm going to write my paper on this and then I will never look at it again.

M: Yeah, I've done that a lot *(laughs)*.

B: I've had plenty of books like that.

H: Do you have, Michelle, any friends or any close student friends that you trust to read over your poetry and give you feedback?

M: I don't like - if I write, I won't be like, "Hey guys, come read my poetry." But sometimes I'll ask my boyfriend Israel, "Hey can you read this? And can you tell me if you like it and what you like about it?" Just tell me what you enjoy and what you don't enjoy, and I'll get feedback like that. It's not useful because everyone's

always just, “Oh, this is really nice,” because they love me (*laughs*) and they want to tell me what I wrote is really nice. But I have a group chat with my peers from my poetry workshop class and we’ll all occasionally send our poems and ask, “What do you guys think?” So, that’s fun!

B: With your narrative pieces, do they send their 10-12 lines and then you send one that’s just 300 lines? (*laughs*)

M: (*laughs*) Yes! I always feel really bad! (*laughs*) Because I would really love for one of you to read this but you don’t really have to if you don’t have the time (*laughs*).

B: Like, “Hey guys, what do you think?” And it’s 30 minutes later - “Oh, I just finished - It’s very long.” (*B and M laugh*) Do you have any poetry you’d like to share on the podcast?

M: Um, actually I did write a really good one the other day, but I don’t know - eh, I’ll share it. Why not? So, this was an assignment that we had to do where we had to imitate the collection that we were reading. So, I imitated one of Natasha Trethewey’s poems from *Native Guard*. Ok, the poem that she wrote is called “Southern History.” If you want to look it up you could. But the poem that I wrote was called “Stand Your Ground.” This was what I was playing with in my workshop class. So we’ll see if I include this. Ok. “Stand Your Ground.” (*written here as dialogue, not in poetic form*) “He resisted arrest. He had it coming,” they said, quoting the Chief. This was freshman year and a seminar on critical thinking. He should have followed orders. He might be alive today. I listen to my classmates in a haze. No one interjects or provides rebuttal, not even me. It was midday. There were still other topics on the board that we hadn’t discussed yet and 35 minutes of hearing my peer debate life and he just says, “Just another thug who couldn’t follow the rules.” We play stupid games, you win stupid prizes. He points to records and arrests and smirks in pride and I stay silent.

B and H: That was really good!

M: Thank you! Thank you.

B: I think we’ve all had experiences like that in class. I mean - it’s just really frustrating to have that, when they bring up criminal records like you said. It’s like, did the police officer know that at the time? No and how is it relevant at all. It doesn’t factor in.

M: Yeah, I actually wrote that - I'm taking a Black Politics class and I actually wrote that poem in that class because I was just, I guess frustrated enough to be like, you know just do it.

H: And it was cool because the emotion and the power behind the words - I can totally see how that could be performed. That's something that, I think felt more powerful to me because I could hear you reading it to us rather than me reading it on a page. The emotion and the words, I think that's really cool.

M: Thank you!

B: I do think that would be a great one to perform. Like it's just a universal thing where people just hear that all the time whenever an instant like that happens just about every week now. Let's move on to something not quite so - *(M and B laugh)* this is makin' me a little sad. If budget constraints were not an issue - if you had unlimited funding - what's your dream project creatively, poetry or if you wanted to branch to another field?

M: Oh, if I could write. . . I would write so many collections *(laughs)* and if there was no time constraint I would just write whenever.

B: Just grant-funded throughout like 40 years!

M: Yup! Just knock them out *(laughs)*. But also I would like to write a book though. I've always really wanted to dabble with fiction, and I think that fiction and poetry could go really well together. I've always had this really distant thought like maybe one day, but I don't know. If budgets were not a thing.

H: What type of fiction would you like to write? Because that's a little bit broad. There's a lot of different avenues you could take with it.

M: I'm a sucker for Young Adult Fiction *(laughs)*. I know you are too! *(H and M laugh)* I would write something that I've always - actually I had this idea for a book when I was sixteen, and I just kept it in the back of my mind, but I never pursued it because I thought, eh it might not happen. But I don't know, we'll see!

B: I have a couple ideas like that where it's like, this is something I'll eventually get to. *(M laughs)* I would say that when I was sixteen and I'm thirty now, so I'm

like, huh maybe I won't get to that after all. It's fun to think about! It's like a daydream activity now.

M: But it's fun though! I'll have this little notes page and I'll put little things I think of. I feel like we all have that push in us to get to that point where we actually will do it. Everything just needs to align to get to that point.

B: Yeah, I feel like I'll probably be more motivated once I'm out of school and not having assignments looming over me.

M: *(laughs)* Yes, I agree.

B: That actually leads to - I want to be a professor, and I'll have a lot more time and inspiration to write eventually. What do you want to do career-wise? I know you said poetry wasn't something you're looking for career-wise.

M: Yeah, so I don't know what career I want to go into specifically, but I've always been interested in humanitarian work and aid work, specifically in community building and sustaining. I've really, really thought about this because what I study is really broad. Because I'm getting to the point where I need to pinpoint what I want to do. Grad school is always an option. And I'm in my third year, so I have a little bit of time to decide that. But I've thought of working for international peace organizations and non-government organizations. I don't know exactly where I would go, but the nice thing about working with gov is that gov can take you anywhere. And the biggest skill that you learn in this field specifically is reading analysis and writing. So, those skills are really, really useful in almost any field. I think I have room to decide. I should decide soon though.

B: I feel like a lot of people get pigeon-holed. I know a lot of people who want to do humanitarian work and they want to go into Law, so they think they have to do Political Science.

M: Oh yeah.

B: I've talked to lawyers and they say sometimes English is a better major for that because you learn how to read things really fast and analyze them fast. It's very varied; you're never really that pigeon-holed unless you're doing like a very specific PhD program - then you kinda are. But that's the point of them so that kinda makes sense.

M: No yeah, if anyone wants to go to Law school I'd definitely recommend taking English. Do not do pre-law programs. *(laughs)*

B: It is intense.

M: I did a little bit. I almost went to Law school.

B: I worked with an attorney and I was like, nope. I do not want to be a lawyer at all. *(laughs)* What were you saying Hannah?

H: I was just curious since you were interested in humanitarian and aid work, are there certain places in the world that you would hope that takes you to? Place you've always wanted to travel to or are close to your heart you want to work with?

M: I've never really thought about where I wanted to go. I'm not restricted to living anywhere. I've never really seen myself as a person that would stay in this country. I'm not even a citizen of the United States. I'm actually a citizen of Kenya because I was born there. I have roots in Kenya, so that's definitely the first place that I could think of going, but in terms of where my job would take me, I don't really have any restrictions. I think the best thing about whatever I do in aid is that it could take you anywhere. If you don't expect to go somewhere, I think you'd have the best experience in where you go because you can just take it all in as it is.

H: It's like a little adventure. You never know where, or who you're going to meet, what you get to experience there.

M: Yeah, and also for me - I like planning things. So, I think it'll be helpful to not completely let go but let it happen.

B: Yeah, plan the trip but the destination is a big question mark.

M: Yeah. I will say I would like to go to Sweden. Sweden is somewhere - I don't know. It's just really pretty and I don't mind the cold.

B: That'd be cool.

H: Perfect!

B: Well we're just about hitting thirty minutes. Are there any last thoughts you'd like to share before we end this?

M: This was really fun you guys! Thank you so much for your time.

B: As students, I feel we don't really get a chance to just sit around - especially now with the pandemic - and talk about not just our work, but the actual field so much. You work with your workshop peers about your poems, but not so much about the field of poetry. And I feel this is providing a good opportunity for us.

M: It is! And I've never discussed my poetry in a "what do you do with it" kinda sense. So it's also really cool for me to, I don't know, see what I'm going to say (*laughs*) and figure out what my poetry is verbally, I guess. But this was really, really fun.

H: Thank you so much for being willing to chat with us and share your poetry. Especially since you say you haven't shared that much about it. We're honored to hear so much about what your plans are.

M: I'm glad to talk to you guys.

B: Thank you so much for joining us. Alright, well I think that's it for our first recording of the Penumbra Online Podcast. Thank you all for joining. Bye!