Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 61: Poetry

Guests: Khairani Barokka

Host: Alice Wong

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For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, all you gorgeous humanoids! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. Today's episode is on poetry with Khairani Barokka, an Indonesian disabled writer, poet, and artist based in the UK. I'm not all that knowledgeable about poetry, and Khairani helped me understand that poetry is all around us and that there's something for everyone. Khairani, who also goes by the name Okka, will also recite one of her poems and talk about her experiences as a co-editor for an anthology titled *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back*, published by Nine Arches Press.

Are ya ready? Away we goooooo! Yar! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Okka, I am just so delighted to have you on my podcast today. Welcome!

OKKA: Thank you so much for having me. It's a real honor.

ALICE: The honor's mine. And I wanted to do an episode about poetry, and I really thought you would be just one of the most perfect people. So, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself, if you don't mind.

OKKA: I'm delighted anytime anyone asks me to speak about poetry, especially people like you! So, my name is Khairani Barokka. I am a writer, poet, and artist. I'm an Indonesian woman living in London in the UK, and I am the creator of works for performance. I'm a performance artist as well as a disability and arts researcher. I'm also the author of two books of poetry, *Indigenous Species* and *Rope. Indigenous Species* is an illustrated poem, one long illustrated poem that I designed and illustrated. And I'm also the co-editor of *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back*, edited by myself, Sandra Alland, and Daniel Sluman. And that came out in 2017, and I'm very proud of it still.

Loving and valuing poetry

ALICE: So, I wanna be honest: I wanted to talk about poetry because it's a form of writing that I still really don't have a firm grasp of. I think poetry is like a whole other animal.

OKKA: [laughs] It is! And it's a wondrous beast. It's a wonderful animal.

ALICE: Tell me why do you love poetry?

OKKA: OK. So, first of all, I think when people say, “I don’t know about poetry. I’m not sure I like it or it doesn’t sit well with me or I don’t understand it,” that for me, that’s like saying, “I don’t like food.” Because there are so many different kinds of poetry, truly. I mean I think the perception, unfortunately, that people learn is schools is that poets are dead men, right?! [laughs] And they write in very complicated verse that isn’t as accessible to a lot of people. And I think that that’s a real myth.

Poetry has been my lifelong love. I first started writing poetry as a toddler, weirdly. [laughs] And I think it’s actually quite a natural thing. Because when you think about it, children’s songs are very rhyme-y. You know, we learn all these little phrases that are meant to get us to remember them, and they’re in rhyme. So, I’ve always somehow naturally been into poetry. I think looking back also, Kaveh Akbar wrote—the poet Kaveh Akbar wrote—and essay for Lit Hub a while back about how the rhythms of, about how Islamic prayer shaped him and affected him growing up. And you know, I’m Muslim, and I grew up listening a lot to Arabic that I don’t understand. So, that’s the funny thing about being Indonesian, is they teach you how to read things in Arabic, but you don’t actually know what they mean unless they tell you. So, that was very melodic to me. And I think poetry and song—I mean, when you think about it, rapping and hip hop—it’s poetry, right?

ALICE: Mmhmm.

OKKA: We’re consuming forms of poetry all the time that we don’t, that we’re not taught to recognize is poetry because it’s been devalued as poetry, right?

ALICE: Yeah, and there’s a difference between all these artificial binaries of like what is considered literary poetry or just art versus lyrics from a song or rap, which is poetry, you know. I think there’s a really weird class divide that I think sometimes is perpetuated and supported by people who wanna be known as Poets with a capital P.

OKKA: [laughing] Yeah! Oh, yes! Let me tell you. As with any art form, there is still a lot of gatekeeping in poetry. But what’s been fascinating, and I feel really fortunate to have arrived in the UK when I did, which was three and a half years ago. Because there has been such a surge of poets who are brilliantly talented here who, before, might have been pigeonholed or marginalized. I wanna shout out a program called The Ledbury Emerging Critics Programme here in the UK, which was begun by two wonderful women, women of color: Sandeep Parmar and Sarah Howe. And they basically, the program is to train poetry critics of color, right, or BAME as they call them here in the UK. Because the way that our poetry was being written of sometimes was not, white critics weren’t always sure how to review us, I think. And therefore, sometimes we weren’t getting reviewed. But it’s really changing, and I see that as a huge positive. I think the barriers are being broken down everywhere. I see that in the States as well.

Making poetry more accessible

ALICE: What are some ways to make poetry more accessible? Or do you think it’s a problem?

OKKA: I think the issue is, in that question, is speaking about poetry as though it’s a monolith, right?

ALICE: Mmhmm.

OKKA: Like somehow there's poetry that is automatically not accessible. As we discussed before, there's so many kinds of poetry. And I think the key is to find poetry that is accessible to you and to know that there is poetry for you. I think one of the joys of having been a teacher for so long sporadically, teaching poetry, performance, literature, art for almost a decade. I remember once I went to a school where I asked kids—this was in Indonesia where I'm from—like, "Who here likes poetry?" And nobody [laughs] none of them raised their hands. But by the end of the day, they were writing their own poems, they were laughing, they all loved poetry. So, I asked the question again. They were all into it. So, that has been a real joy to really change people's perceptions of what is poetry.

And to think of it yeah, like food. There's some poetry that is for you and some poetry that isn't for you. As a poet, let me tell you: not all poetry is for me, right?! There is poetry that I hope listeners of this podcast will love no matter who you are.

[fun, upbeat electronica music break]

How poetry is different from other forms of writing and the creative process

ALICE: And in terms of kinda an art form, what is unique and powerful about poetry that's different from other forms of writing?

OKKA: For me personally, as a poet, I find it absolutely delicious that a poem can be fiction, non-fiction, a combination of both. I mean to be honest, I think of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction as very blurry in any case a lot of the times in the writing that I like. But a poem can be fiction or non-fiction or a combo of both, and nobody will be the wiser. And I really love that because you can really draw from anything, and you don't have to explain as a lot of non-fiction writing calls for people to demand some sort of explanation or elaboration further about your own life. I think what's wonderful about poetry, especially as an Indonesian woman coming from very rich, we have hundreds of different languages, hundreds of different oral and written and tactile cultures is for me, rediscovering a lot of aspects of my heritage through poetry. I mean the Javanese alphabet is itself a poem. [laughs]

ALICE: Mm.

OKKA: So, it's as if a, b, c, d was one word, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l was another word and then on and on. And that those strung together create a poem, that's very cool. And I've been, you know, it's been a great way for me to explore ways of decolonizing my mind and my art further by rediscovering things from my own heritages. My mother is Minangkabau, and there's a lot of pantun, which is also called [said in US English accent] "pantun." It's a form of poetry going on in that, in that cultural heritage. So, for me, it's been a treat just discovering that the world is vast, the world is not just Western, the world is not just abled through poetry, and that what you call— You know, there is a sort of mystery that might come with a poem because it's not always explicitly stated as fiction or non-fiction unless the poet has come out and said so that I find really beautiful, that I really enjoy that mystery. [chuckles]

ALICE: Mmhmm. And speaking of your own work, what is your creative process like, if you had to describe it or just generalize it even though I'm sure that's really hard to do. But kind of what's your process when you're thinking about a idea or just in the writing process?

OKKA: Mm! So, the words that immediately came to mind, Alice to be honest, were "haphazard!" and "chaotic!" [laughs]

ALICE: You're keeping it real.

OKKA: Yeah! For sure. I mean truly, sometimes I— You know, when I write a poem, I'll follow. It's be an image or it'll be a phrase or it'll be an idea that I just, I wanna tease out. And you go through various drafts, and you perfect. I mean I have a poem that, a poem I wrote 10 years before it was published, and it took me— So, actually to go along with the audience and the themes of this podcast, as a disabled poet, it really took me a while to recognize that using words like "blind" or "mute" were ableist, right, even though I myself identified as disabled. Because as you know, it's a constant learning process, right?

ALICE: Mmhmm.

OKKA: And all disabilities are different. And with those one poem called *Flood Season, Jakarta*, I had used a term that was kind of ableist, and I didn't know that it was ableist until— I submitted the poem for publication about nine years after it was written, and I was like, oh shit! I forgot that. And I wrote the poem when I was like 21, 22, and this was before I identified as disabled. And so, then I changed just like one word, sent it off for publication, and it got published, thankfully, in Poetry Review. And I just thought, oh wow. This is such a blessing in disguise because if I'd published it back then when I was much younger, I would've still included that ableist phrase. So, also, I think a process for me is just understanding, just humbling myself and understanding that my poems and poetry and my writing will evolve as I learn more, as I evolve as a person.

[fun, upbeat electronica music break]

A poetry reading

ALICE: So, Okka, would you mind reading a poem or maybe a excerpt of one?

OKKA: Not at all. So, I'm going to read a poem called *Okka to Marina*, which is from the anthology *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back*. It's not in my anthology. Sorry: it's not in my collection, *Rope*. I kind of thought it was perfect just for this anthology. *Okka to Marina*

So, first of all, listeners: If you don't know who Marina Abramović is, you can Google her. She's a performance artist who's gotten really huge. I remember going to her performance at the MoMA when I was living in New York City a long time ago, about eight or nine years ago now, and yeah, she was a big deal. And as a performance artist who's disabled, this is what [laughing] I would say to her if I met her! I'd challenge her a little bit.

** Okka to Marina*

Woman to woman.

I couldn't get into the Serpentine,
but I stared at you
sitting at the MoMA in 2010,
from the sidelines, no tears.
Short hair, glasses?
You wouldn't remember.

You did it, Marina.
We felt your soul ground anchor.

This is an urgent note:

regarding the navel star
carved into your flesh,
that preceded giving a heart to Ulay
for nursing your wounds
(sweet-child, archetypal falling-for).

I could not see you at the Serpentine.
No. More accuracy required:
I did not attempt it.
The lines were too long, and I tend
to harbour post-traumatic humming
sessions, induced by a week of feeling
as though someone is stabbing me,
invisible, and people walk by as it happens
and ask me how I am,
as silent marauder makes his incisions.
This illness of pain induced by
tiredness, strange luck,
what feels like a knife. My scarred teacher.
The blade stays in for a long time, Marina.
We nurse our own wounds
when everyone else has gone.

We must ration how we use
our hours of active duty,
with certain nervous systems,
and honestly,
I'd rather draw my fingers
across the hairs of my arm,
along the grain,
learn to cook asinan
in a sitting position,
or rock a friend's child,
heavier and heavier,
than wait in line for you to touch me,
and teach me about mindfulness.

Though it sounds heavenly.
Though I could probably make myself
ruin the exhibit by reading you this poem
in the instant in which you brush my shoulders.

Many of us other women
in the attempt of Performing Art
feel the searing of pain
with inevitability like the weight of air.
Beg for it to leave, ego in shreds.

The coven stars on our bellies lack scars.

I wanted you to know,

when I think of ‘Rhythm 0’ and I cringe,
I think of how waiting in line
at the Serpentine would have cost a body
an aggravated assault,
of torture by an unseen assailant
operating through the nerves,
and I’d close my eyes
and imagine strangling it,
wake up in the morning
with its nails coagulating with my blood –
the cost of seeing you
with your legacy of stabbing violence
of the kind that people see and understand,
and how you’d never know.

Just wanted you to know.

Please say hello to Jay-Z.

ALICE: Wooooow! I love it!!!

OKKA: Oh, thank you!!! See? You love poetry, yay! [laughs]

Reading poetry versus poetry performance

ALICE: Yeah. You know what’s funny? It’s like I wonder if so much of it is you feel so much when you see people performing and reciting it. And that’s a very different way of accessing poetry than just reading it, which is a, I think, different kind of experience in itself. So, I feel like wow, the way you read that, it just came alive for me.

OKKA: Oh, thank you so much, Alice! That means a lot coming from you. Yeah. So, *Rhythm 0* was a piece, a performance piece, where basically, she had all these weapons, all these instruments. She basically let people do anything to her body. And the thing there is sort of watching that, for people who are abled, right, who don’t have chronic pain, it’s like, ugh! We can’t watch that pain. Cringe. But you know, for myself and a lot of other women who are artists, our pain is invisible. So, I hope that came across that I was just thinking about this and huh.

I have a one-hour show, one-woman show called *Eve and Mary are Having Coffee*, which took me to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was the first time I came to the UK. And it was all about making—my right side and my chest have nerve damage—so, it was all about painting that part of my body. And by the end of the hour, it’s completely painted over in blue and the coffee, and the blue coffee [chuckles] so that people see. But yeah, I also, one thing that I also like about poetry is people think it’s supposed to be really serious. But I hope what came across in *Okka to Marina* and some of my other poems is that I like using dark humor in poetry.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

OKKA: And I like making people laugh with poetry. And I think also when you were saying about the different modality of accessing poetry, like listening to it being performed as opposed to reading it, that’s how I felt when I first discovered BSL poetry or British Sign Language poetry or realized that my poems could be signed as they have been a lot in the past. Which really made me understand more the bodily part of the bodily interpretations of words in a way that’s really

beautiful. So, I think what's great about also coming from disability culture is, especially when decolonizing disability cultures, is to open yourself up to different ways of being, and that way, open yourself up to different ways of both creating poetry and accessing poetry.

[fun, upbeat electronica music break]

Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back and other publications

ALICE: Speaking about the anthology that you mentioned, *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back*, there's a piece that you co-edited with Sandra Alland and Daniel Sluman, can you tell me briefly about the origins and your experiences as a co-editor?

OKKA: Yeah! Sure. So, *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back* was years in the making, so around 2013 and 2014. So, the book was published in 2017. Markie Burnhope and Daniel Sluman, who are two Nine Arches Press poets who are disabled, spoke to editor Jane Commane, who is also our publisher at Nine Arches, about the idea of an anthology of "disability poetics," right? Then Daniel and Markie were the editors, and they brought on board Sandra Alland as a third editor. And then unfortunately, Markie had to step down for health reasons, and I was asked to step in. And I stepped in right before the selection process began. So, what Daniel, Markie, and Sandra had done was they put out a call for submissions. And you see these CFSs—or calls for submission—all the time, right, in all kinds of industries, but this one? I was blown away! I was so into it. It was really against all the -isms, really talking about doing things our way and not for an abled gaze or not for abled audiences. This is for us, by us. And it was really, I was promoting that call for submissions, and I submitted poetry of my own for a section of the anthology. So, to be approached by them and have them say, "Hey, do you wanna be an editor," was incredible, right?

So, I stepped in right before the selection process began. Markie, Sandra, and Daniel had already put out this call for submissions, and they'd already gotten in tons of submissions over a long period of time. This was 2016 when I came on. So then, the selection process started, and it was really lots of hard work: hours and hours of work. And especially, with we all were working at the same time. I was doing a PhD. I am doing, I am still finishing up my PhD! But at the time, I was also doing my PhD while doing all this. And it was lots of Skype sessions. Sandra lives in Glasgow, Daniel lives in Gloucestershire, I live in London. So, we were just Skyping three-way Skypes. Three-way Skypes, baby, all the way! [laughs] A lot of them. And a lot of emails and a lot of group emails, a lot of Google Doc work, and a lot of discipline on our part and also a real commitment to ethics. And it was really, the whole process was really special to me, of creating that anthology.

ALICE: And what was the response in terms of submissions? Were you just completely surprised by the number and quality of the submissions, or what was that like?

OKKA: I was really…. I don't think I was surprised as much as I was so grateful for the breadth and depth of the submissions. This is the first anthology of its kind in the UK, the first anthology of D/deaf and disabled poetics, especially edited by all disabled people, right? So, I think we couldn't have done this with an abled editor. We just couldn't have. Because there are lots of things that we understand innately that we didn't have to explain to each other, right? And even though I was the only person of color on the editorial board, and I did have to explain some things to my other editors, at least for the D/deaf and disabled part, it was a refreshing thing to not have to explain things, right? And to agree on why some things were very problematic!

So, it we got a large, we tried to include a real depth in terms of the work that we chose but also breadth in terms of diversity of location, not people aren't just in London. Because the publishing industry is heavily skewed towards London, just like in the US, publishing is very skewed towards the two coasts and big cities. We tried to get good representation of LGBTQI+ poets and also poets of color, which I think is really important, especially because I see this anthology as being a decolonizing anthology as well.

Which, in reviews, it's interesting because the response for us has been overwhelmingly positive, though, I have to say. Like really, really overwhelmingly positive and from amazing outlets as well. The anthology was nominated for a Saboteur Award for Best Anthology in 2018, which meant a lot, which meant a lot to all of us, and that was something that was reader-nominated. And I think so many people have been coming up to me or emailing me, DMing me about *Stairs and Whispers* from all kinds of places. People are enjoying it in Jakarta, where I'm from. People are enjoying it in California, where you are, Alice. It's been really, I've been so— You know, we didn't know what the response to this would be, and to have it be so great is fantastic. It's been wonderful, yeah.

ALICE: Well, that's wonderful, and I really hope that becomes more of the model that disabled and D/deaf editors for anthologies or books about, by D/deaf and disabled writers. I think that's often a missing piece: editors and also, as we talked about earlier, critics 'cause they're all just part of the larger process. It's not enough just to be a writer and get your stuff out there, but it's also so much how it's edited and how it's framed by other people, so.

OKKA: Yep! Marketing helps, publicity helps, and distribution, all of that. I would also like to shout out for people who want to get further into D/deaf and disabled poetics, there are journals out there. The English-language journals that I would recommend are *Deaf Poets Society*, who also try and put out audio versions of their poems, and obviously, a pun on [laughs] *Dead Poets Society*!

ALICE: Yep.

OKKA: And there's a journal called *Wordgathering*.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

OKKA: And you know, a lot of times, D/deaf and disabled poets who publish in those two journals—and they aren't by any means the only ones out there—if you look in their bios, you'll sometimes see that they're editors of books or of journals. And so, follow that thread. Follow that thread.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

OKKA: The cripping thread. [laughs]

ALICE: Yes, yes. It's everywhere.

Is there anything else, as we wrap up, any final words you'd like to talk about in terms of poetry, your work and anything else you'd like to share?

There is poetry for everyone in every language

OKKA: Anything else I'd like to share? Read poetry. Read widely. Or if you are a BSL user or an ASL user or a BISINDO user—and BISINDO is the Indonesian sign language—or any kind, if

you use sign languages, there is poetry in your language. If you use any language, there's poetry in your language, and there's poetry that will touch you. So, keep going until you find it. [laughs]

ALICE: Right. So, the moral of the story today is poetry is for everyone, and there's something out there for everyone in terms of poetry.

OKKA: Yes!! Yay.

ALICE: Well, Okka, I am just so delighted and just so, just so grateful to speak with you today. I just really wanna thank you.

OKKA: Oh my goodness. Thank you!

Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Khairani's work on my website, along with other links to D/deaf and disabled poets.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

*Note: *Okka to Marina* was first published in *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back* (Nine Arches, 2017).