

## Episode 2: This Edge

**Introduction** *New Narratives for the North East, brought to you by New Writing North. Telling fresh stories, exploring the historical legacies, and looking to the future of the North East.*

*Episode 2: This Edge.*

**Bronwen Riley** We're just about to go on to Hadrian's Wall, on to one of the best stretches. For a lot of the Roman period it was the northern frontier, but still, still, the Romans wanted to go – maybe they didn't want to, but they felt they should go – further north. They'd got, at one period, up to Inverness, and retreated back here on numerous occasions. So this did mark the northwestern frontier.

*My name is Bronwyn Riley, and I'm a writer and editor with a particular interest in the classical world.*

My story is called 'Regina and Barates: A Tale of the Northwestern Frontier'. It centres on a tombstone in the museum at Arbeia, which is South Shields. So somehow this woman Regina found herself on Hadrian's Wall, enslaved and bought by this man called Barates, who was from Palmyra, Syria.

**Bronwen Riley [reading]** Barates shivers in the sea-salt wind, wrapping his thick woollen cloak more closely around himself. Regina's birthplace was on this island, 280 miles south. His native land is 1,000 times as far away. Back home in Syria, the scent of thyme and jasmine hangs in air as warm and enveloping as the desert sand beneath his feet. Here, on the north-eastern edge of Britannia, the salt-sharp wind cuts through his bones and the sand on the beach is as sticky and lumpen as cold British porridge. Up

here on the Wall, wind and rain are enemies as bitter as the Britons and the Caledonians.

**Bronwen Riley** My piece is all about edges and boundaries and borders. And there's a double meaning an inch edge, edge and edginess. I think Hadrian's Wall is symbolic, because it shows that there is a border, a brutal border, which fizzles with sort of military energy and reminds us of war in this region, and the divide between Scotland and England, which has never more relevance than at the moment.

**Carmen Marcus** The boundaries of the North have been changing constantly and realigned constantly. And I see those boundaries as wounds, as cuts, that cause false divisions between people who have so much in common, and yet so many differences that they can teach and exchange with one another.

*My name is Carmen Marcus. I am a writer and a poet. And I guess it's important to say, a fisherman's daughter.*

The north almost welcomed invaders. The Vikings came along and they brought their gods, their traditions, most importantly, their shipbuilding. So you can see the ghosts of the Viking longships in the cobbles, that are built and still ride those waves all along the north-east coast from Yorkshire right up to Northumberland, and in Scotland, these beautiful double-ended, round, sort of beach-launching boats. These things, those cultural exchanges, deny those geographical boundaries and stay true to the place as a point of an exchange of cultures and ideas.

**Juliana Mensah** Because of the sea, the North East has always been a place of exchange.

*I'm Juliana Mensa. I'm a writer and researcher and I'm based in the north of England.*

I came to the North East 16 years ago to do my Masters, and I planned to stay for one year. And I've been there ever since. I've lived in the North East longer than I've lived anywhere

else, now. I'm the daughter of two immigrants. But I only found out when my dad came to visit for the first time many years ago when I first moved, that he had actually lived in South Shields for three years. And he'd gone to the marine college. And at the time, he wasn't living in the UK, he had come from Ghana. And so I think the North East has always had people from around the world visit the North East to make the North East their home. And it is open in that way. I think one of the things that makes it different from a place like London that has so much constant exchange is that there is a settled community; there is that indigenous community. There are people here who've lived, like, multiple generations in one street. But that's also a wonderful thing, and it comes with its own stories. And it doesn't necessarily preclude opening the door for other people.

**Bronwen Riley [reading]** Hadrian, that Greek-loving emperor, restorer of order and army discipline, built the Wall to separate the Romans from the barbarians (as they put it). The Wall hacked its brutal way across the narrowest neck of land – 80 Roman miles east to west, west to east, from the North Sea to the Irish Sea – an arbitrary line for the ease of the conqueror, cutting through ancient British landholdings, severing ties of kinship, language, trade and religion. Defining the region's history, ever after.

**Bronwen Riley** We have to remember that it is this border zone. The shifting power, shifting centre of it, really defined the North East's history. Long after the Romans, there was always this conflict. And that must eat into the soul of a place and contribute to its energies.

**Juliana Mensah** Borders create a divide where there hadn't been before; where groups of people were actually connected, and they share much more than divides them. When a border is imposed, I think something performative happens and people start creating that divide for themselves – the 'them and us' begins. I think the borders are arbitrary, but that's not to dismiss them, and that's not to say that they don't then become a social construct that has power, and that can impact and oppress. I can understand why, politically and strategically, sometimes it's important to define a particular area, even the North East. Like, grouping that collection of land together as the North East is something that I think is politically driven, because that area of land has been forgotten, and most people have been overlooked. And so

it's necessary. And this may be a bit utopian, but it would be nice to imagine a world where we could do that without excluding.

**Carmen Marcus** In terms of how the North is perceived, it's perceived as a region, which is a really dangerous and limiting label. Because once you give something the label 'a region', and especially a place like the North, it means that assumptions are foisted upon it. So the North becomes a story of decay, disintegration, post-industrialisation, poverty porn. And I wanted to tell the story of the North not as a place that is divided. I wanted to tell the story of North from the perspective of the sea, as a borderless place. So if you go in search of this mythical thing 'north', you just keep moving – you keep moving all the way around the world. And that is kind of like the journey of the North East too, if you take the viewpoint from the sea. So you come to the edge of the water and it's not a barrier, it's an invitation to go beyond, and further and further and further out to explore. And you're also looking at that horizon for what will arrive, too.

**Carmen Marcus [reading]** Next to us a woman unmoors from her kids. A faint shark bite of scars track under her costume. A flatness where a breast has been. She goes under – the sea loves all the tender parts of her that the sun won't touch. Yet me and the blessed woman are stuck at the water's edge. Only from a distance does it look like a true edge. The way the kissed imagines being kissed: the surprise that water is attracted to itself. She feels the tug of it, the yank of that love. I don't. The sea's skin rises. It could mean anything.

**Carmen Marcus** The idea of a boundary, that idea of a single unified boundary to place, doesn't actually exist. The more we search for it, the North, the more the idea of that border disintegrates.

**Melissa Tutesigensi** In terms of the discussions around the North East, and how it differs to the rest of the UK, I think that's really helpful insofar as it allows you to sort of distinguish certain characteristics and certain needs, but recognising that actually, there is a lot going on

there, and [recognising] the diversity of opinion, diversity of voices, people aren't necessarily just caricatures of their identity; that there's a lot more to them than that.

*I'm Melissa Tutesigensi, and I'm an assistant producer at Times Radio and a writer.*

Often the North East is just seen as a region, like it's just out of the way, or it's kind of on the periphery. Whereas if you're starting from the North East, then it is the centre of your world. You just need a plurality, because not everyone is having the same experience. I think it's just as simple as that. Not just in terms of geography, but race and religious background, the perspective that you're coming from. I think if you're not hearing all these different perspectives, then a lot of people are going to get left out. And so I don't think that's very helpful.

**Juliana Mensah** Often, the North East is talked about as being at the edge of civilisation, or being quite wild and rural. And that language, those concepts, are often put towards parts of Africa. And so I wanted to explore the way in which the west or the UK has treated parts of Africa, and how that might be transposed to the North East of England. My piece is called 'The Real Bernicians, or How to Create a Country'. In the piece, it's a world that looks very much like ours, but a slightly alternative reality. It's Brexit day, but Brexit day also happens to be the day of Scottish independence. And on this day, there is a piece of land in Northumberland, which throughout history has been Scotland, it's been England, and it's had other names. But on the day that Scotland leaves England, and the UK leaves the European Union, this land suddenly belongs to no one, and a group of friends – they're a young group or millennials, they're recent graduates – and they're the only people who realise that this part of the North East now is unclaimed. And so they stick a flagpole, a homemade flagpole, into the earth and they decide to create their own country:

**Juliana Mensah [reading]** We, the people of the Republic of Bernicia, honour Mother Earth and all that she gives us. We take our place as custodians of this land and acknowledge the interdependence of all life; recognise the inequalities of our past; respect those who came before us; and believe that Bernicia belongs to all who live in it,

united in our diversity. We therefore adopt this Constitution as our supreme law in order to build a united and equitable Bernicia able to take its place as a sovereign state in the family of nations. May Mother Earth protect us all.

**Juliana Mensah** The initial idea was, there was a big kind of furore on Twitter because this father in America decided that he wanted his daughter to be a princess. And so he was going to find somewhere in the world that was contested or had belonged to no one and he was gonna claim it. And he decided that was going to be North Sudan, and he was going to make his daughter the Princess of North Sudan. And I remember ranting about it because I was like, “Why is it, even in this day and age, a white man with a flagpole can go and just stick it into the land and claim it?” And I wanted to write a story where a brown girl and her friends stuck a flagpole into a piece of land and claimed it. But I also wanted to mirror some of their interactions with what happens when new people go off and ‘find’ – quote, unquote – new land, and how they can deliberately or unintentionally oppress or infringe upon the life of the people that they find there. And I suppose that’s the parallel with Africa, or Australia, or, yeah, lots of places in the world.

**Carmen Marcus** I knew I was going to have to write about Captain Cook, because part of the story is, who were the adventurers who voyaged out from this land? And, really strangely, when it comes to Captain Cook, his family were from Marton, mine from Redcar, and the seafarers intermingled. So our family goes way back. So there was kind of a sense of loyalty, but also a sense of suspicion around that, because I was very aware that Captain Cook colonised an island where people already existed, and the people who had much more in common with my fishing ancestors than I could ever imagine. So I knew when I was going to tell the story of Captain Cook, I didn’t want to tell it through his eyes. And as I was researching it, I came across the story of a navigator priest called Tupaia, who helped Cook navigate those shores around Australia. And without his help Cook would not have been able to map. And these two men were the same: they were navigators, and they were map makers, and they could read the water. But there was also a betrayal there, because as Cook learned those skills about reading the boundaries of the island, it was about claiming that territory and renaming that territory.

**Carmen Marcus [reading]** The Priest's House dangles at the bottom of the cliff. His tools are set out on the kitchen table alongside his bread: a bent needle, ink and a stick. He sits me by the fire. The needle finds inlets in me. Sounds me. Estimates me. Until I am nothing but a raging edge. "I helped a man draw lines around the edge of the world," he tells me. "He marked the bites the sea had taken from the land with ink. He was faithful to his lines; a priest like me. I liked him very much. But when he finished, his people took the land inside the line, gave it their names and made their homes there. Because I am drawing this line on you, it means this is mine."

**Carmen Marcus** One of the legacies of Captain Cook – he didn't bring the idea of tattooing back, but he brought the word back, and he combined the Polynesian words 'ta tau' with 'tattoo', the drumming, the sound of the drum. Seafaring people have always had a long history with tattoos. So there's early seafarers who joined Captain Cook on that voyage, they wanted to be marked, to show the story; to tell the story on their skin, of their journeys. I wanted to pay homage to that, and I wanted to pay attention to that. But I guess, because the skin is a contact boundary, when she's marked, she understands that some markings are really dangerous and are about ownership. And as soon as you define an edge, you create division, conflict, and disunity. As soon as you surrender that fluidity at the tide line, you change the nature of the way that humans connect and interact, and deny that connectivity. So I wanted to tell the story of the navigator priest, and even face the violence, the blame, and the discomfort that we feel with that story. Because it's really, really important that we accept that – that we accept that it's not an easy story to tell; that it's not a straightforward story about exploration and discovery. It's a story about erasure.

**Bronwen Riley [reading]** From across the Western Ocean winds blow in fresh unease. Who and what belongs where? And for how long does one have the right to claim a belonging? Some stand proud guard round the many monuments in their towns and cities to a lost British imperial past, while others clamour to destroy them and hand back the spoils of conquest arrayed in their museums.

**Bronwen Riley** It's very interesting that I was commissioned to write this piece before lockdown, and before Black Lives Matter and the toppling of statues and everything that came out of that. The way that I started this piece was very different to the way that I actually ended up writing it. And it was extraordinary just thinking about these last few months, how they've completely changed: our society has changed, our perception has changed, our expectations and outlook.

**Bronwen Riley [reading]** In a cynical age, sugar-coated with sentimentality, Regina's monument now tells a heart-warming tale of a homesick migrant from Palmyra who freed a British girl, married her, and erected a moving monument to her memory, careless evidence for a happy mixed marriage in multicultural Britain. Syria is entering its tenth year of war with 400,000 dead and more than six million refugees cast out into the world. Few gain entry into unwelcoming Britain. For those who do, it is the North East – now one of the poorest regions in Britain – that accepts three times as many refugees in relation to its population as the richest territories, London and the South East. Outside Arbeia's museum at South Shields, the great River Tyne spills out into the North Sea, pouring over the shipwrecks of lost empires and the toppled statues of disgraced men. Some relics have sunk into the waters of oblivion while others continue to re-surface in the endless rhythm of the tides.

**Bronwen Riley** I was very interested to see that the outrage, in some quarters, that the toppling of the statues caused, as though this was something that was almost anti-historical, this was a not-respecting of tradition or culture. But to me, with this long perspective of history, this is absolutely what people do; that statues, I don't think, are ever meant to stay forever, like Ozymandias. So, this is something that has always happened. But maybe the shock is that this is happening in Britain, and that this is not what happens in this very conservative and still, in many ways, imperial – at least with a strong imperial memory, which, in a way, has been stirred up so greatly in the last few years.

**Juliana Mensah** Brexit, I think, played a lot on identity politics and on a divide between class and race and immigration. And I think that there are elements of that in my piece. There's the



line, 'No one thought to say we've divided the land that was once their home. No one noticed that the first Bernicians were trying to live in two countries and no longer belonging to either.' And for me, that spoke to colonialism and what's been done to indigenous people all around the world. But also it spoke to indigenous communities in the North East, where the industries are closed and the world has changed, and they are living between two countries now. They're living between past narratives of what their families were able to do and the lives they were able to lead, and a space now where the new narratives, in terms of opportunities, aren't open to them. And as somebody who grew up in London, as a second generation immigrant – my parents are from Eastern West Africa and met in London – that idea of being between cultures, between places, is something that I really connect with, with the North East. I felt as though culturally we were coming from different places, but we were all experiencing the sense of being stuck. There was something about where we've come from, and our heritage, that meant that we were stuck trying to figure out where we belong.

**Melissa Tutesigensi** I think it's just about being able to see a version of yourself in some way, in someone else, or recognise a kind of commonality. I went to Durham University, graduated last year, and have written about the experience of being an undergraduate in the piece. I talk about the gaps in between – in my case it was that town-and-gown binary.

**Melissa Tutesigensi [reading]** Durham in the last half of the 2010s is a place marked by its duality and the extremes of its opposites, caught in a series of contradictions held together by the enduring town/gown division. A tale of two cities that sit alongside one another on a parallel path, never converging, like train tracks. Yet there are shades to this: experiences that fall between the cracks, even if we don't hear about them all the time.

**Melissa Tutesigensi** I was with this event for asylum seekers and refugees. And, you know, there are women of all different age groups, and having vastly different experiences to me. The differences were very clear. But then you touch on moments of common ground, and I think once you talk to someone about an experience that you've also had, it's much easier to have a

conversation because you're both sharing in something, and there's more that binds us together than separates us.

**Lisette Auton** I think there's connection in having these conversations.

*My name is Lisette Auton. I'm a disabled writer, activist, poet. I do stuff with words.*

Because of the time that we're living in, because of austerity, because of this plague time that we are living in, there is division. I think there's been this massive thing about, you know, who should live and who should die: does it matter about those people over there? Some people have been given DNRs – Do Not Resuscitate – orders. And I think that's where art is always, and has always been, so powerful. Because it's a way to tell stories. So if more disability arts work, which is sensational and powerful and different and electric – if that's programmed more, on stages, then we won't be so Other.

**Mim Skinner** Division happens where we don't have encounter, right? So we all have perceptions of what the other person is going to be, and that's why they use the phrase 'Other', like, you're one thing and someone else is another. And we keep that view, and we fix to those, but those images and those perceptions are disrupted by encounter.

*I am Mim Skinner. I'm a writer and community worker, and I've been writing for New Writing North about our café, REfUSE Café in Chester Le Street in County Durham.*

We are in a time where things feel very divided, and there not being actually a language for dialogue, you know, whether it's about Brexit or trans rights. Actually, when you're living amongst people who – whether that's race, or class, or gender, or experience – have very, very different experiences to yours, that's uncomfortable, and privilege is uncomfortable, and it should be. And before you have understanding, you've got to have a bit of that pain or that tension. And I think the reason that I love spaces like REfUSE is that you are in this space of discomfort, and that discomfort is unavoidably attached to connection. You know, we've got guys in the kitchen, who are refugees from Syria, other people who've spent long times in and

out of prison, and they're just getting back into work. We have older ladies who are retired, head teachers and lawyers. And actually, this kind of mix of encounter does lead to camaraderie, and dividing ourselves up into these silos where we're comfortable and where we're familiar and where we're similar to other people isn't where we get the connection. And I think part of breaking down those barriers is hearing people's stories. It's very hard to dislike someone or see someone as Other once you've heard their story. And I think that's the power of storytelling.

**Carmen Marcus** I'm seeing a real change at the moment in the North East, and a confident voice emerging of people who want to tell and honour stories that have never been told before. And I think as long as we keep taking the power to tell our own story in our own way, there's a really interesting future for the North East. As long as we keep resisting the stories that are told about us, the stories that diagnose us, the stories that want to reinvent us. And I would like to see for the future of the North East, the boundaries between those borders of Yorkshire, Northumberland – I'd like to see those boundaries disintegrate in the way the sea disintegrates things. I'd like to see conversations happening between our commonalities and our differences, and I'd like to see us looking over the sea to those other shores and building connections. That's where I am with the North East at the moment. I'm all anticipation to sit around a fireside and hear what those stories will be.

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