

Episode 3: The City is A Language

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 Three: The City is a Language.

Lyndsey Ayre I know Newcastle intimately. I grew up here, and for most of my adult life I have lived here. Sometimes I think I know it better than myself.

Lyndsey Ayre [reading] I like walking the city streets early in the morning, or in the evening, after it has been raining. I walk alongside the dark nightclubs on Mosley Street, with their upper floors lit from beneath like ghoulish figures telling ghost stories. I go to the cinema, alone, and sit outside the adjoining café with a book beneath the outdoor heaters. I walk through Grainger Market, with its lugubrious yellow lighting; visceral, earthy smells; and eclectic mix of businesses old and new. And I wander through the crowds on sunny afternoons, when the entire city seems to shrug off its air-conditioned malaise and come on to the streets in a joyful, exuberant way that seems – improbably, incredibly, almost laughably – Mediterranean in spirit.

Lyndsey Ayre

I'm Lyndsey Ayre. I'm from Gateshead; live currently in Newcastle. I'm a writer. I won the Sid Chaplin Award for working-class writers as last year.

One of the things that I love about cities generally, and that I feel like is really present in Newcastle, is kind of like the jumble of architecture from different times. And just in Newcastle, you've got the castle keep and the city walls, or what remains of them. And then you've got Grainger Town, and you've got all of these really beautiful 18th Century buildings, like the

Grainger Market, for example, which I absolutely love. And I always just feel like I've kind of gone back in time whenever I'm having a wander about. And that smell of, like, sounds disgusting, but the fish market and the butchers and stuff. And then you've got things like the T. Dan Smith era of all of the brutalist modernist architecture. All of those different areas have different shorthands, almost – like the shorthands for different experiences and different people and different things that you'll see in different parts of the city. I think you only really feel at home in a city once you've learnt that language.

Alex Niven But to me, when you walk around Newcastle, it feels more like a kind of modernist European city, you know – it has links with Scandinavia. It has links even with Scotland, and their kind of modernist traditions there.

I'm Alex Niven. My job is lecturer at Newcastle University in English Literature, but I also write, particularly political commentary and cultural analysis.

Newcastle is a fantastically metropolitan city. You know, Newcastle is a much bigger city than it should be on paper. I think often people don't quite know, until they live in Newcastle and experience it, that it has the kind of cultural feel of being a huge and quite diverse city.

Andrew Hankinson One of the things that makes it feel really different around Newcastle is the Town Moor, because there's just this huge moorland, and there's all these cows all over it.

My name's is Andrew Hankinson, and I'm a writer. I grew up in Newcastle and moved away for a little bit and then moved back when I started a family of my own.

I go to the library every day to write, and I just cycle over this moorland with these cows around you. And that's right in the city centre.

Lyndsey Ayre There's a huge hill in the middle of the Town Moor as well, that's called Cow Hill, because the Freemen of the city graze cattle on the Town Moor. So, like, this morning when I was walking across, there was just cows in the middle of the path and stuff.

Andrew Hankinson I wish we made more of that, and I wish more people saw that, and went to it, and spent time there.

Lyndsey Ayre The Town Moor's actually bigger than Central Park. I mean it is huge. Every year you have a travelling funfair that comes, called the Hoppings. Going back through time, it was a space for protest. There was a protest about suffrage there, in the early 20th Century.

Alex Niven Sometimes your, sort of, cosy Tourist Board clichés about the North and about the North East, they're a bit kind of soporific – but the whole of the North is a lot more exciting than these kind of cosy Yorkshire Dales, Northumberland coast, kind of Bamburgh Castle holiday brochure clichés.

Melissa Tutesigensi [reading] Cathedral and Castle. It's dominating and devastatingly magnificent: a visual used so freely as an emblem for everything that Durham represents. But from this vantage point, it's impossible to see the detail, the individual bricks, the houseplants in the windows, the faces of the people that breathe life into this place. As I look at that picturesque image, I know there are shades to it, and that's the Durham I wish people knew about – instead of the dense symbols that control its cultural brand. We'd do better to listen to the quieter voices that show us the texture of what it means to be a part of this medieval city.

Melissa Tutesigensi

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

Somewhere like Durham, you experience the city on a different level as a visitor to how you experience it as a student. And in many ways, a student at Durham University is not experiencing the city level, the sort of everyday texture. In the North East, there are so many different kinds of people, there are so many different backgrounds and stories, but you're only ever seeing a kind of watered-down version of that whole diversity because people are really, I think, led by those sorts of stereotypes. And in my case, it was town and gown. And you can

feel like you're seeing a different city if you walk on a different side of the road. If you go to certain parts of the city, it's like you're not even in the same place anymore, even though it's all part of one community. By the time I left, I knew that I'd experienced so much more.

Lyndsey Ayre I've got quite a lot of friends who have never been to Newcastle before. And then they come to visit me and they've always been really surprised by the city. I'm not sure what they're expecting, really. I think maybe they're expecting some kind of, like, quite down-at-heel, brutalist architecture kind of city, and then I think they've been quite surprised when they've gotten here. I mean, you can't come into Newcastle without coming over the Tyne if you're on the train from down south. And I still think it's the nicest entrance into a city, by train, that I've come across, to be honest. It just takes my breath away every time really. And you've got Grey Street and stuff, which is absolutely beautiful, and down by the Quayside. So I think there's that kind of assumption of it being somewhere that's quite grey and grimy – that 'it's grim up north' aspect of things.

Alex Niven In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* one of the characters gets posted to Newcastle, and it's like, you know, he's been kind of sent to the moon, almost. There are various different examples of this in literature and culture, going back through the ages really, of Newcastle functioning as a kind of, you know, if you get sent to Newcastle, you're almost never going to come back.

Andrew Hankinson That's what people don't quite understand about the North East, I think. They sort of think, particularly if you're living down south, it's kind of like, "Oh, you know, there's the Midlands, and then there's the kind of North. But the North East is north, you know, that's really north" – and we're only less than three hours on the train to London. So I don't quite understand why people don't kind of come up here more. The countryside is amazing, so, you know, the urban stuff is pretty amazing around there as well. It's an interesting place, and I think people don't quite understand it, and that's why we need to explain it better.

Andrew Hankinson The North East is an incredible place, and Newcastle in particular is an incredible city with lots of potential, and it has this quite remarkable industrial heritage, and this very unique sense of, you know, that this is a place where you could do extraordinary things.

Lyndsey Ayre [reading] Cities live. They breathe, they grow old. They go on living. A city is a physical representation of the continuity of time. Newcastle is over 1,000 years old as a settlement: Hadrian's Wall stretches beneath streets where burrito bars and cigar shops rub alongside churches and libraries. Things get jumbled. Our lives are in constant overlap with one another and the past is always present. Buildings go up and buildings go down. Each age offers something to us, a way of looking at the world.

India Hunter You do get a sense of the Tees running through Stockton, carrying our past.

My name is India Hunter. I am currently in college, so sixth form. I also do poetry.

Stockton is about an hour South of Newcastle and I've lived in Stockton and the surrounding areas for, like, my entire life. It's part of who I am. This is the one fact I always tell everyone: we were like the foundation of railways. The first railway was Darlington to Stockton railway. And we still have Darlington railway station, we still have Stockton railway station. They haven't been touched as much. So that is a big reminder of our history, our culture. Especially in Stockton High Street, as well – all of the buildings have the dates of when they were built in gilded writing, but then you look down and it's, like, a Poundland or something. And it's definitely, like, a sense of 'people were here before us'. There is a long line of people like us, of working-class people who have inhabited the streets. The buildings are smoke stained. These people who fought for workers' rights, and fought to get us to the place that we are now. Yeah, it's quite nice to be reminded of that in the buildings, in a subtle way.

Melissa Tutesigensi

So much of it is steeped in such cultural history, there is this sense of heritage there. And people who are from the North East tend to have a lot of pride about where they're from. And there's this sort of sense of the old and the new. I think it's living and breathing. When I walk

past certain windows and stuff, you think old people my age, like, however many years ago, would have seen and interacted in this building but they would have been doing a completely different job – just experiencing the same view. Or we're in the same seat, or on the same high street looking at the same shops, we're kind of seeing and experiencing the same things. And so that's a consistent thread from the past that's now being experienced in the present.

Andrew Hankinson I encourage people to come visit the North East, you know. I tell my friends, "Come and stay here; we'll show you around." And I take great pride in walking around Newcastle with them, showing them different buildings; showing them, you know, the bridges over the streets and Quayside and all that sort of stuff. I show them all that stuff. And I'm really proud of that. And I want to show them the castles, the wall, the seaside, all these sorts of things. And I tell people I don't know, you know, "You should come on holiday here. You should come and visit, and it's wonderful. It is beautiful." But you know that people are having very, very difficult lives a mile away from there, half a mile away from there, you know. Where does it go from there?

India Hunter Our identity, in Teesside, at least, is steel. And we've had that taken away from us. And it's about trying to find something new. So I feel like there is a lot of room for creative arts and, like, we're building our own culture back. There's an arts college in Middlesbrough called Northern School of Art, which is one of the only ones left in the country of, like, a specialist arts college. Teesside University is one of the leading institutions in the UK for the study of games designing, like animation and that kind of thing. Poetry as well. There's been a lot of opportunity for me to do poetry gigs. Our poetry community, our writing community, is so tight knit, and we all know each other and we all work together. We've had to foster our own culture. We've had to get that back. And a lot of it is political, because we feel that's the only way we can get our point across.

Lyndsey Ayre There's actually loads going on. There's like a really nice creative community in Newcastle. I've had meetings with a certain cultural organisation, and they literally said, 'Well, there's nobody that lives in Newcastle that we could get to work on this'. Like that kind of attitude just really bothers me. Because I just think, you obviously just don't know, and you

haven't looked into how many people are here and what people are doing and what kind of creative community that there is. But it's like really capable people doing really exciting things.

Andrew Hankinson People don't really know what's going on up here. They have these ideas about what the North East is: "oh, it's, you know, industrial heritage". The way I started my piece is:

Andrew Hankinson [reading] When I pitched this piece, the first three sentences of my pitch were: I don't want to write about coal mining. I don't want to write about shipbuilding. I want to write about shopping. But the whole first part is about coal mining. I'm sorry, I tried to avoid it. I'll keep it brief. The second part is about suspended ceilings, which are those grids and tiles you find in offices and shops. In my early drafts, there was a lot about suspended ceilings. I've cut most of it out. You're welcome. The final part is about grout and the future. I have a good story about grout. I have no stories about the future.

Andrew Hankinson I think there is a thing where people are really proud of that industrial history of the region. And I mean, I am as well – like, you know, I look at some of these people and what they achieved and I think it's amazing. And I think it's interesting and I think we need to know it. But, you know, when these people write about coalmining and shipbuilding, it makes the region feel alien to me. It's like, I don't know what this place is that they're talking about, because that's not what I see around me. It's never really been part of my life. I used to go shopping with my mum and my sisters on a Saturday, nobody I knew did coalmining or shipbuilding. It just wasn't part of my life anymore. I was born in 1980.

Lyndsey Ayre Growing up, whenever you would read or hear about Newcastle, it would always be like Cheryl Cole, or Ant n Dec, or coal. I wasn't sure what to do with those references, really. I just wasn't sure how to how to latch on to that. And especially because people of my generation – I'm 29 – I've got no experience with coal and coalmining and that kind of thing. So I've just always felt like slightly alienated by it. Like, I think it's important that we move away from these old narratives. I would never doubt for a moment the importance of

coal and mining to the heritage of the North East, but I think it's equally important to look to the future.

Juliana Mensah A few years ago – five, six years ago – a friend that I'd been to university with, who now lives in London, came to visit, and was surprised that it wasn't the industrial north. [laughing] Just like, "If you got out of London a little bit more often you'd realise not the case."

I'm Juliana Mensah. I'm a writer and researcher, and I'm based in the north of England.

The North East has become stuck in particular narratives of what it was. And industry, the economy, culture has moved on, and it has moved on as well. But it feels as though nationally, the idea of the North East hasn't moved beyond the ideas of the industrial north and the mines. There is a real power in telling your own story. And I think I feel that as a black woman, I feel that as a woman from the North East – I feel there are a range of narratives that are put on those identities, and being able to take control of the story and being able to frame it are actually incredibly empowering.

India Hunter I think a lot of what I've written in the poem is about how people from the outside already get it. They haven't experienced it. And they don't necessarily want to? Like, they see the outside: they see all the weeds growing through the cracks in the pavement and everything. And they see that as a weed, but we see the beauty in it, because we've grown up with it. We've grown up knowing that there's more to it than just boarded up shops and smashed-in windows. We see behind it.

India Hunter [reading] The sky is a familiar grey / Clouded with the smog / That rests on the rooftops / Fairy dust highlighting / The cracks in the windows of the corner shop.
// It's a short walk / From one side of the street to the next / But even in those two peaceful minutes / am surrounded by a gallery of life. / Neighbours chat over fences / Kids play curby / A man asks if I've got a lighter / Or some change for the bus / Or something else to that effect: / A spider's web of souls / Crossing like a cat's cradle /

Completely interwoven. / If I were to stop and take it in / I would see it to be beautiful; /
I'd take a breath and know that all is well / Because Stockton's heart still beats.

India Hunter I feel like Stockton is a heart of normal people. Our history needs to be celebrated a bit more, like the history of normal people. Looking at the history of the English language. In the 1800s some random Southern London people decided these rules for grammar, specifically so the poor people couldn't access them; specifically so there was this correct way to think and speak. So I kind of decided, like, sod it, we can speak however we want to speak, and I think there is beauty to that. It's much less stiff, our way of speaking; it's a lot more jovial. I've noticed it, as well on Twitter and everything, like the way we type – like, if you're saying 'have', or you say it like 'av' – as we say it, it's spelled 'a' 'v'. And it's generally accepted that everyone can read that. And then you get southerners tweeting back at us being like "What are you trying to say?" It's like a nice little secret code that I quite like. It's like a sense of solidarity.

Mim Skinner In any family or any group, there's this set of in-jokes and little references and bits of understanding that everyone inside has, and then as people become part of the community, there's an understanding that they gain of these little references and little jokes and ways the place works.

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

I guess one of the things that makes the REfUSE community recognisably community is this set of references and set of language that we use, so I tucked in the piece about 'wounded' and one of the guys, Dave, using that quite a lot: "Oh, I'm absolutely wounded today, you know, we lost the football" or "Oh, I'm wounded, you forgot to butter my toast", and that becoming really part of the language and part of how we talk about disappointment in the café. And I guess, in many ways, I've been aware of that more broadly as a region. There's such a strong regional identity around language, and around dialect and accent. I've been here for 11 years now, but I grew up just south of London near Croydon. It has been, for me, a journey the

same as people coming to the café, where the more I've got to understand – whether it's local myths or local stories or being able to sing along to the Lambton Worm Song, or understanding some people's language – and the local stories kind of make up identity. The more that language has dripped and dropped into my own language... In a way, that has made me feel more at home here.

Lyndsey Ayre The accents change even from village to village – like I could tell the difference between somebody who grew up in the tiny village that I grew up in, to somebody that grew up 10, 15 minutes' drive away. I think maybe in the past they almost had their own little culture, kind of thing, and their own little inflections and stuff, and the accent that's just slightly, slightly different. There's a lot of diversity between the different towns and villages. I think, increasingly, as I've grown older as well I do have a tremendous amount of pride in being from the North East. And then my heritage and – in a lot of ways I do like the fact that my accent ties me to the region. But when I was younger, I was always very self-conscious of having an accent. I did my PhD in Newcastle. And it was definitely something that came up, was that there was a sort of sense of feeling like you didn't sound intelligent or something, because you had a Geordie accent, or you had a North East accent.

India Hunter In the past, when I've tried to come across as more intelligent, or I've tried to make a point, I automatically kind of revert to a more posh, enunciated Southern-style accent. And I've recently noticed, about a year ago, that I'm associating my own accent with someone of less intelligence. I've got to do some internal work here to address why, and try and change that. That's the only way that people with northern accents are going to stop being perceived as less intelligent. I have a brain. And I have an accent and those two don't contrast each other.

Juliana Mensah When I first arrived, the accents sounded quite similar to me. I'm thinking Sunderland, Gateshead, Newcastle and Northumberland. But for me now, now I can hear the variations. The thing that connects the North East, the wider North East, I suppose, is the warmth. There's a cultural kind of warmth. You can find yourself in a conversation with anybody standing a bus stop, being on the metro, being in the supermarket. And I thank the

bus driver when I get off the bus. So if there's a language, it's something about warmth, I suppose. And an openness.

India Hunter Everyone talks to each other, everyone's checking up on each other: they all care. They care about everyone being safe. It's like when you're in a nice little café, they'll be like, "How's your day?" and I've never talked to them before in my life, but they do genuinely care. 'Kindness' is how I would describe what makes us special. It's a specific, sort of, 'we look after each other' kind of kindness, yeah.

Juliana Mensah So I have lived in a place in Gateshead which has a really big Irish community. And every St. Patrick's Day, myself and my husband, who's Greek, go and we see there's everybody from the baby to the grandmother there. And there are young girls doing Irish dancing, but they're also us. There's an Asian family – there are people from all over the world there as well. Don't get me wrong, it took a while to be invited. I'd lived in my flat for quite a while before I knew this was happening. But I did get invited. So I think it takes a while. And actually when I first moved to the North East, as well as meeting and becoming friends with people who are from here, there were lots of people from all over the world who had come to the North East because of work, because of the universities. And we all met in this place that wasn't quite home for us, and created a home for ourselves. And then the longer we stayed, we got to know the people who were from the North East. I now feel as though I can say that I'm from the North East.

Lyndsey Ayre There's just a real sense of being at home, I think. And I don't think that you can feel that until you can situate yourself in a city.

India Hunter As a whole, I think the architecture is representative of the people. It's very mixed, and there are old buildings and there are new buildings, right together, and it's beautiful in a way – but I feel there's a romance in the urban-ness and the wildness of it. Everything is its own, everything has its own personality. So yes, I do think it's beautiful.

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