In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode 7: Metal

TRANSCRIPT

Contains some strong language

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change. Episode seven: Metal. In classical mythology the titan Prometheus tricked the gods and stole fire from them to pass on to humans, to make their life easier. The gift of fire has become a symbol of technology, which can either prolong life and ease suffering, or harm and destroy. For the philosopher Gunther Anders, everything changed on the 6th of August, 1945, when the first nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. After that, he said, we can no longer imagine this world we've created where violence is possible on a scale far beyond our comprehension. Today, our smartphones and computers involve technology and elements whose origin can be traced back to nuclear science, as well as the extraction of rare earth minerals. What harm are we doing without even being fully conscious of it? Professor Richard Dawson from Newcastle University raises the ethical complexity of technological progress.

Richard Dawson:

We are seeing more use of rarer earth metals that are crucial to the manufacture of microchips, or magnets in our wind turbines, for example. And these are in very small quantities throughout the planet, so digging them up is hugely challenging. Then processing that raw aggregate material and extracting the small amounts of these rare metals in enough quantity to be usable is hugely energy intensive and actually quite environmentally damaging. It's not just about environmental challenges - many of these rare earth metals are in parts of the world that are fueled by conflict, which creates other social problems as well. It is a big challenge, I think, for the world to do this responsibly.

Linda France:

If we only owned or interacted with machines we could a hundred percent agree with, in terms of ethics and sustainability, we'd have far fewer devices. Even before the digital revolution, the philosopher Anders said that our addiction to technology meant we were no longer dreaming of a better society, only dreaming of a better machine. How do we make sure we're driving technological progress and it's not driving us? How can we begin to extricate ourselves from the tangle of unintended consequences? What might it look like to stay on the side of life? All life?

Inua Ellams:

Humans are great at burying their heads in the sand like ostriches.

Linda France:

I took some of these questions to Inua Ellams, poet, playwright, and performer.

Inua Ellams:

We feel overwhelmed by the scale of change required to create a better world. I think about that in terms of the great wealth disparity across the world. I think about it in terms of the legacy of colonization, the invention of racism, the societies it's created, the way power moves through those societies. So, all of this history is linked with poverty, is linked with famine, which is linked with climate change and desertification, and it keeps compounding itself. And there are huge, huge topics, things to wrap your head around and it's frightening to consider and understand that fear. So, the only way is to go incrementally, inch by inch, diagonally sometimes - to go round the back roots and coming that way. And I think we're still machines powered by emotion, and love and fear are the most powerful emotions. And fear is often far more destructive than love is, but love is what we need. Oh my God. Isn't that an actual lyric from a song?

Linda France:

That's right. Yeah.

Inua Ellams:

And we have to cater to that sometimes and to nurture it. I think appealing to love might be greater than to fear.

Linda France:

Maybe this would be a good point for you to read your poem.

Inua Ellams:

Yes, this is 'Humanity', right? That poem?

Linda France:

Yeah.

Inua Ellams:

It came from a sequence of 55 poems where all the poems begin with the F word. And this sequence of poems are all about climate change. If I had to describe the sequence, I'd say it's from anger with love, and this is one for humanity.

Inua Ellams:

F*** Humanity I want to bellow / like a card-carrying champion of the Nihilist Society / f*** all the ways even our most earnest faithful / folded over / humbled deep down considered attempts / at amending our venomous ills / undoes itself / think / almond milk and California wildfires / nitrogen fertiliser and industrial food waste / factory emission limits and the trade in carbon offsets / free market and exploitation / voluntary work and White saviour complex / vegan avocado diets and deforestation / phones to connect our lonely spirits and Black bodies in coltan mines / F*** every single attempt / Our best bet is to annihilate our vicious selves / I want to bellow / as Ellie pushes her three year old hand into the calloused cave of mine / Her fingers / frail as elderberry petals / flutter / She calls me down to the careful constellations blooming / in the brown universe / of her brimming eyes and all I am folds over / humbled deep down / reconsidering attempts / at amending our venomous ills / even if it undoes me

Linda France:

Thank you so much. What I loved about the dynamic that you were able to achieve in the poem was this moving from this sense of paradox, things being pulled in different directions to a place of unity by the touch of her hand, by the tenderness. So, it's as if love has the power to change the way that we read these signals.

Inua Ellams:

I think that is true. But sometimes I question how deep its truth is. I remember reading somewhere that the world is chaos; the job of writers is to impose order. And it helps us be human in all of this. It helps us not pull all our hair out, and it definitely doesn't work in my case because I'm completely bald. But it's an effect which helps me control the chaos. It's something that I'm conscious of doing though, which is to somehow beautify the ugliness, and present these difficult poems or these difficult topics in digestible ways so that audiences have something to grapple, to take. But sometimes I wonder if perhaps I shouldn't sugar coat or smoothen things. If the pill is rough, I should just give the rough pill.

Linda France:

But I think we get a sense of the bitter pill very much in this poem. I was very aware that you talk about the mining, the coltan mining in places like Nigeria and Rwanda and the Congo.

Inua Ellams:

And the Congo.

Linda France:

Yeah.

Inua Ellams:

Coltan is essentially a precious metal that is used in creating mobile phones. It helps with, I think, amplifying connectivity. It's without a doubt a capitalist commodity. And because of the scale of mobile phone productions, more and more coltan is needed, but there's limited supply. It's not found in many places in the world, so there's a lot of competition to get it, and a lot of exploitation to get it. And a lot of child labour are used in extracting coltan because of how small their bodies are, they can fit into tight places. So, this thing which satiates loneliness in various parts of the world, destroys families in other parts of the world, and it's one of the counterpoints, the things that are cancelled in our quest for connectivity, and contributes to climate change and the problems that we're facing in the west but also globally.

Linda France:

Charmaine Papertalk Green is an Australian poet, and visual artist.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

People can become comfortable in not even thinking about the issues of climate change, or COVID pandemic, or what's happening in Afghanistan. I'm just talking about where I live in Western Australia. People are quite comfortable, and they're comfortable with their lifestyle. You can see things on a television and you can get horrified by what you see, but you can simply stand up and go and turn that television off, which means you can shut it out from your mind.

And in some places that can't happen. That's a sort of comfortability that with those sort of blinkers on things do become dangerous and people don't start thinking about the land, the ocean, or just the environment in general.

Inua Ellams:

I think humanity's still deeply self-centered. And we haven't considered that we might just be a part of earth's history. There's this adage, which I returnto a lot. And it goes: humanity is the point in time when nature realized it exists, and we're just part of this continuum of awarenessess beyond us. But the dark addition to that is that at some point nature will forget, which will spell our doom. Humanity won't live forever. We can't, no species can. And I don't think it's bleak to consider our end. It's not about bleakness, it's not about depression, it's not about our end, it's about our self-centeredness, which is ultimately causing so much of our upheaval.

Linda France:

Charmaine belongs to the Yamatji nation in Western Australia, where she bears witness to the destructive effects of mining on the land.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

To us, the earth is living. It's the same as us, and it sustains everybody because we belong to the earth, the earth belongs to us. We're all connected in this one way. It's quite sad seeing the holes in the ground. And there's huge holes in the earth that have now appeared from the mining near some really very significant sites and Dreaming tracks. But there's also man-made hills, new landscapes that the younger generation who will grow up with them and just think that they're natural. They'll think that they always belong there where they are. They do belong to country, but they came out of the ground, on to the top of the ground, while someone else is taking those resources simply to make money. It all goes back to money.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

Like when COVID first started, for instance, the miners who were fly-in, fly-out, they call them fifos. They were still allowed to fly in and fly out from interstate to go to their jobs. They were not effected straight up. They were still moving them to make sure the resources industry kept going, kept turning over. It kind of leads into the poem, which talks about Yamatjis are rich.

Charmaine Papertalk Green:

‘Yamatji Rich’

Uncle often said 'Yamajis are rich people'

Some probably laugh – but I knew what he meant.

Rich did not mean dollars or gold

Rich is spiritual. Rich is knowledge.

Listening to the wind bring weather reports

Watching animals and birds with messages

From loved ones or of something to happen.

The land has strong, rich stories
Imprinted all over its face.
Stories handed down for thousands of years
(Sure is something to boast about).

Rich meant being able to sit
All day and read the land
Learning from the land
Respecting the land.

And being rich in
All this knowledge.

Inua Ellams:

It's about empathy. It's about creating space for deeper conversations and for people to be able to understand and see your life and why you live the way you live and how you've arrived at your life. And I think those are the conversations we need to have about why we keep buying new gadgets and why this government keeps on telling us to buy new gadgets. Where did this culture begin, and what do we need to do to steer it otherwise? So, that cuts across everything from racial politics to climate justice.

Linda France:

Because we know that lifestyle, the avocado-vegan diet, and the almond-milk, and the mobile phone, et cetera, to be able to afford that and to also create as much carbon emissions that it results in, means that people in other parts of the world, generally people of colour, are suffering great devastation and loss. They're losing their homes. They're not having enough food or water.

Inua Ellams:

And we're just beginning to see that, especially with the famines happening and the refugee crises happening. In Nigeria, it's a population of maybe 230 million, it's exploding, but there are tens of millions of internally displaced people. Some of that is to do with climate change. And yes, we have our governments. I'm thinking specifically about the new laws which will persecute immigrants who sail across the channel to the UK, to England. And the irony isn't lost to me; this is how England went about colonizing. They sailed across the vast waters, landed in countries illegally, and shot down those who resisted. And it's just going to get worse. People across the world, people of colour are going to become increasingly more desperate. And all of it is because of the history of this country.

Inua Ellams:

And we can't want the same things, and we shouldn't want to want the same things. And we have to acknowledge our history, the legacy of this country, and figure out ways that aren't punching down, that aren't pejorative, that aren't reductive, that aren't insulting. Where we are trying to marshal other countries into not making the same mistakes we have done in terms of the commercialism and waste. I remember Gandhi was once asked if he wanted India to be as rich as England. And he gave the most beautiful answer. He said, it took England the world's resources to be as rich as it is now. How many planets would India need?

Linda France:

In traditional Chinese medicine, the metal element has the potential to cut like a sword through what we need and what's no longer necessary in our lives. Its energy models a way to sharpen and polish what is useful and let go of what has become a burden. There's no burden bigger than climate change. Nothing else is more important than addressing how we carry it and share the burden more fairly. One way to start is by asking difficult questions, and perhaps also making difficult choices.

Linda France:

I wrote this poem out of conflict about flying, and it's helped me decide to choose not to in future. It's called 'Flygskam', which is the Swedish word for flight shame, or maybe it's better to say flight conscience.

‘Flygskam’

At the bottom of my itinerary it says
FLIGHT(S) CALCULATED AVERAGE CO2 EMISSIONS
IS 546.44 KG/PERSON.
I am that PERSON
and I don’t know what 546.44 KG AVERAGE CO2 EMISSIONS are.
I envisage them as a toxic cloud, speckled with charcoal dust,
sense the sky-wide weight of it on my back.
I carry the burden of Atlas, hero, victim, martyr.
If I touched it, it would be cold,
smelling faintly of gas, as if I’d forgotten to turn the cooker off
after boiling milk for my morning coffee.
The milk spills.
The blue flame gutters and goes out.
The gas leaks.

The coffee’s travelled from South America.
I sit and drink it in my kitchen in Northumberland.
The gas is syphoned from a tank in my garden

I'm trying to disguise by growing a hedge of hawthorn
and willow, the grass in front frilled with snowdrops.
Three times a year a tanker comes to fill it up.
The pipe makes a sound between humming and hissing,
a long black poisonous snake
slithering through the gate across the lawn.
A few weeks later I get a bill for more than I can afford.
It's February. The old stone house is freezing
without the heating on.

I sip my coffee, read my flight itinerary and look it up:
546.44kg of CO2 is more than half of all the emissions
the worker on a coffee plantation in Colombia
would produce in a year.
A white winged thing
thrashes through the cloud in my chest,
struggles to fly free.

Linda France:

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