

[Season 2 Episode 6]

## “Shifting the Orientations of the Heart”: Conversation with Sarah deLeeuw, Part Two

**Sarah deLeeuw:** At a very personal level, if I think about beauty, I think about disruption and revolution. Those things are stunningly beautiful, and I wouldn't want to give up being able to pay attention to them.

**Lisa Dickson:** You're listening to W Y R D, Wyrd House Radio. I'm Lisa Dickson. And this is Wyrd Words, conversations about literature and learning in higher education.

Welcome to part two of our conversation with Sarah deLeeuw, Professor in the Northern Medical Program and award-winning poet and essayist. In part one, Sarah joined me and my cohost Shannon Murray, to talk about how the stories we tell about the landscape and our bodily experiences have material effects on our lives and wellbeing.

In part two, we delve into Sarah's creative practice and explore ideas of empathy, beauty, and hope, and the necessity of paying particular attention to the absent and the overlooked.

We've been talking a lot among the wyrd sisters about this idea of critical empathy, and one of the things that you've said in an interview is that "if we want to recognize ourselves, we have to do so relationally and contextually." And one of the issues that we've been raising about this idea of empathy is the complexity of that concept, that it's not just simply, you know, "I know how you feel," which is a statement that is so crossed over by so many actions of power and particularly, the contradictions that come once you actually look at the fullness of someone in their context.

And one of the things that I've really enjoyed about your work is the emphasis that you have on the particularity or the situatedness, the detail of where things are found. I've been reading *Outside America* and you have more than one piece that's basically a catalog of things found in the road, for example, which is amazingly affecting. There's this moment where you talk about, a bib that's found stuck to a sidewalk. This idea of how deep things become when you place them in their context. There's one particular image in *Outside America* that I know is going to keep coming back to me forever. And it's the image of a dog with its leash standing in front of a doorframe with no house attached. And so this idea of meticulous descriptions of context. Shannon, do you want to pick up that question?

**Shannon Murray:** As I was reading your work, Sarah, which I absolutely loved. I kept being drawn to absences, drawn to what's missing, drawn to look at what we tend not to look at, what we tend to step around, or not notice. And Lisa was just talking about the critical empathy we've been talking about. It strikes me that so much of your writing is inviting us to see the full humanity in other humans and especially the ones that we might tend not to notice, ones that are not in our eyes or even our minds eyes. Can you talk a little bit about that? Why do you find yourself drawn to those absences, those missing pieces? Or is that fair that you are?

**Sarah deLeeuw:** It's very, very fair. And thank you both for turning this conversation in that direction. So let me sort of start by saying empathy and the concept of empathy has a certain

currency in medicine. Medical educators worry a lot that our students lose empathy as they move through their medical education program. There's a lot of evidence to suggest that students have high levels of empathy when they enter first year. And that those levels are almost entirely absent by the time they exit their fourth year, their graduating year. As you also clearly know, since you've tacked the word "critical" onto empathy, there's, I think, a very rightful pushback against sort of unthought-out chucking around of the concept of empathy, because as, as you've both alluded to, empathy fundamentally, and in its kind of early iterations of meaning, was to feel into somebody else, to actually feel what they are feeling, to have the experience of somebody else.

And, you know, I'm fundamentally just not a believer that that's ever possible. I don't think that it's productive even to reach for that, particularly when we're thinking about relationships between care providers and patients inside medical and healthcare professions. I don't think that Dr. A suddenly embodying the feelings of somebody else is, A) attainable, and B) if we sought for its attainability, that it would actually offer us any greater or lessened power dynamic between care provider and patient. So, I think there's of course in the literature in terms of medical education some thought that the concept of sympathy is slightly more productive than the concept of empathy, sympathy, sort of being, understanding somebody else's suffering as opposed to being inside the feelings of somebody else.

Sympathy has always struck me as a slightly saccharine, sort of pedantic concept that feels a little bit paternalistic. And I do think that regular conversant use of a concept adds to its meaning. So, I mean, I might be able to say, well, I mean, look at the dictionary definition of sympathy. I think it has more, sort of, critical, productive capacity than empathy. But I think if a doctor was saying to a patient, "I'm empathetic toward what you're feeling" versus "I'm sympathetic," I think the patient might feel a little bit infantilized with the word sympathy, even though empathy might be more problematic.

So I'm sort of parsing part the questions about empathy and sympathy and sort of alluding to the fact that I think they both have much to offer conversations about how do we come to some kind of place in this chaotic world, in our own lives or in the disciplines that we work in that is productive and meaningful in terms of making an opening space for people who don't necessarily, or haven't necessarily experienced the privilege that we may have, bearing in mind that privilege, of course, exists on a continuum.

I really think that critical intellectual compassion holds a number of key possibilities in that equation. I know that I emphasized the need to move the heart earlier on in this conversation, but I actually think orienting to things that upset us or that we feel some kind of revulsion about in many respects can be addressed through intellect and through proximity. I think, if we are immersed and can intellectually grapple and think carefully about the things that we don't understand or the things that we have kind of a weird gut feeling about, I think if we can take a breath and stop there, or if we can have it pointed out to us that perhaps, unbeknownst to us, we seem to be orienting to something with that kind of gut revulsion or I don't agree with that, or that upsets me, I think if we can apply intellectual lenses to that, to really reflectively understand in a critical way why it is that we might be orienting to things in that uncritical ingrained unconscious bias, that will be an extraordinarily productive way of easing the ease with which we respond in universal fashions to certain things.

So to take that back to your question about particularities and absence. I think that part of that work is to continuously point out the minute lack of universalities between subjects, between places. It is to pay remarkable and focused attention to the details that do make up difference, and to think about those and to then insist on critical intellectual pushback when we're trying to erase those or move toward a universal that allows us a kind of comfortable orientation to things that we have arrived at through erasure of the particularities. So, from my perspective, as somebody who's quite interested in the particularities of female bodies, and racialized bodies and bodies and places that are imbricated in webs of power and disempowerment, I think the best way to insist that people take a second look at those, a third look, is to point out the particularities.

And I think, at a very material level--I'll tell you: when I wrote the book *Where It Hurts*, which is a collection of quite poetic literary nonfiction, short essays, I was asked about how I desired those pieces to appear on the page, because many books of essays have right-indented paragraphs, but no hard returns between paragraphs. And I was quite adamant when I was working with the editors and publishers that I really wanted the hard spaces between paragraphs. I wanted the visual absence on the page to offer that kind of space of breath, that space of absence that was also being reflected in the narrative construction. I wanted the materiality on the page to kind of gesture toward that absence. I really do think that the mechanics of the way we represent the particularities, be that an ongoing sentence be that enjambment, be that shortened sentences juxtaposed against the long, breathless construction, we can mechanically adapt our writing so that it highlights those particularities that are then forced into the imaginations and reckonings of people who want to impose universalities. And I think by doing that and by reading and engaging in, in my case, producing that kind of writing, we have a chance possibly at seeing ourselves in others and having others be fully ingested into ourselves because there are so many very micro-scale, very particular overlaps, and I think those deserve attention and they deserve our intellect.

**Lisa Dickson:** I was also thinking about my favorite line of Shakespeare when you were talking when Hamlet's working himself up to his high pitch of becoming a revenger and he has this line where he talks about the "remorseless, lecherous, treacherous, kindness villain," and one of the things that I like to do with my students is get them to say it and then talk about what happens to their faces, about how it locks your teeth together and all those sibillants, and you have to spit, you know, and that idea of how a text actually gets inside your body. And I was thinking about that when you were talking about even spaces between paragraphs kind of creating a sort of breathing almost where you can pause and think, you know, but also how that translates into how we would, we would breathe our way, through those moments. And so there's all kinds of opportunities to think about how our embodiment, whatever that is is played out in things like typography, even. And I think there's an opportunity there to rethink what we're talking about when we're talking about empathy. That the capacity to connect across these terrains, I think, is one of the things that makes art so important because it kind of lays out that circuit board for us.

I have a real interest in the idea of beauty, because beauty is like empathy, it's another one of those weirdly complex terms. It's done a lot of damage, but it's also done a lot of amazing things. And so I want to turn that question to you with things like *Where It Hurts* in mind and some of those other things that aren't pretty to me, but they are beautiful. Have you thought a little bit about how beauty fits into this question about particularity or connection?

**Sarah deLeeuw:** I actually, I thought about it quite a bit. Lisa. I've thought about it at a few registers. So I'll tell you a couple of stories.

And the first story is that, as I've mentioned, I've spent years working in places like women's centers transition houses and for three years in the Kingston penitentiary for women. And I've worked with Elizabeth Frye Societies and other feminist justice organizations. And on a couple of occasions, I've had folks say to me, "Why do you, why do you dress up when you work in places like women's prisons? Don't you think that you should dress down, like, wear sweatpants?" And I've always been very fascinated by that concept that working with women who are leaving domestic violence situations or women whose kids might be apprehended or women who were spending the last five years of their life sentences would somehow be bothered by me wearing shiny, pretty ridiculous outfits, that beauty would--my idiosyncratic orientation to beauty and style--would be an affront to people for whom it may not be accessible or who have different aesthetic tastes. And I think that beauty is often twinned with sort of a concept of elitism, that there's this inaccessibility to beauty, that it's somehow unavailable, that there's an arrogance to beauty. And in my experience that that's not the case. In my experience, it's a gift to think so highly of people that you want to parade yourself in sparkles and outfits in order to interact with them. It's a compliment to them to think that they might think you're ridiculous. It's a humbling and conversational, generating possibility.

Now the politics of beauty, they are interesting. For instance, in environmental efforts, Ed Burtynsky is a fairly famous Canadian photographer who's been heavily criticized for making the terrifying and the violence of the Anthropocene somehow beautiful, as if that's fetishizing it and downplaying the violence and the gore of it. And I'm occasionally taken with that. Maybe it's this old Marxist leaning of mine that somehow a gray palette and this kind of depthful ugliness will make something more toothy in its impact. But at other times, I'm not convinced by that critique at all. I think Ed Burtynsky and people who are paying attention to the remarkable, thick aesthetic of something are in fact honoring it in a way that has always elevated something for us to discuss it.

Also, in terms of what you were just talking about, about breath and what poetry can do to us, I'm thinking here of M. Nourbese, Nourbese Phillip, who's a poet wrote the book *Zong*, and through poetics, I think, absolutely dismantled human capacity to ingest one of the most grotesque and disruptive and terrible components of white supremacy on this globe and that was the Intercontinental and cross-Atlantic trade and killing of black subjects by throwing black humans overboard. But one of the things that M. Nourbese Philip does in book *Zong* is she says that, by trying to impose linearity and digestibility to ideas, we're doing them a second violence because they shouldn't be digested. They shouldn't be made easy on our metabolic intake of them. They should be disruptive. But that also is an incredible act of beauty and resurging of something terrible. I think we need to take that orientation to the world and to beauty, to heart as well.

I guess finally, you know, what is beauty? I think that there are problematic universalizations of it that are generated through corruption and power and hegemonic structures of patriarchy and extractive capitalism and white supremacy. But at a very personal level, if I think about beauty, I think about disruption and revolution. I think about things that don't sit comfortably with other things. I think about the unexpected and I think about sort of crooked, discomfort. To me, those things are stunningly beautiful, and I wouldn't want to give up being able to pay attention to them.

**Shannon Murray:** So one of the other questions that we've been asking is, given this extraordinary year that we've just gone through and are still going through, we've been talking about the people we have, the texts we have, the films and music and art we have in our dugout, on our team. You know, what have we been turning to in this year for solace or for meaning, or for explanation. Who do you have in your dugout? What texts have been particularly meaningful to you or what art this year?

**Sarah deLeeuw:** I'm a voracious reader. I also so watch the most inane, drivelly impossibly terrible crap on Netflix. I love action films and sort of ridiculous mattress-like, testosterone-injected male bodies exploding each other and fighting giant things. I read the backs of cereal containers and like Harper's on my phone and I turn to all of it in some ways as a cathartic inspiration.

But when I was thinking about this question, it's funny. I returned to a very slim text and it might be that I returned to it because it was also just written about again in *The New Yorker*. It's a book that I do return to, and I do recommend. It's a very slim volume by a fairly well-known member of the white, heterosexual, male patriarchal universe of writing. And nevertheless, I think it's a spectacular book and the book is by Paul Auster and it's called *Why Write?* And I think that very, very thin, very unassuming, very meandering, short essay is one that I've not only returned to during the pandemic, but one that I've returned to since my earliest undergraduate years of writing. Because I do often wonder: Why do I write? Why do I do this? I think Paul Auster's slim, slim response to that, *Why Write?* is one worth returning to. I think it's beautifully crafted.

**Shannon Murray:** Wonderful. And so I guess we'll end, shall we Lisa, with the big question, which is, are you hopeful now? And if so, what does hope look like in your own work?

**Sarah deLeeuw:** You know, I have always been hopeful, even working in the kind of throes of anti-domestic violence work in women's prisons, working in very, very remote, very, very marginalized geographies. I don't truly know why it is that I feel hopeful. I think it's an enduring question. Why is it that some people kind of feel a sense of optimism and other people feel a sense of pessimism? Make no mistake, there's days when I put my pillow over my head and flatpmy feet at the end of the bed and have a little temper tantrum, and I'm convinced that, you know, everything is terrible. But on the main I feel extraordinarily hopeful.

And what does hope look like for me? To be perfectly honest, it looks like work. It looks like putting my nose to the grindstone and trying to contribute in the small and best ways that I know how. It looks like believing that I am not entirely insignificant, and that if I work hard enough and long enough, I can effect, albeit very likely tiny, tiny changes, but they would be changes that weren't being effected if I weren't working hard toward them.

So I really do think for me, hope looks like, it looks like work and working really hard. I think writing into the world is part of what I believe maybe can make a small difference. And I think we just have to work hard at that.

I'll just read a short excerpt from a book of poetry that I'm working on right now. It's a continuation or a follow-up to the book *Skeena*, which I envisioned, always has being a three-part series about the main geographies that I grew up in. So *Skeena* of course was the Skeena River watershed and Terrace, and that sort of area of the Northwest. The second book is

entitled *Lot*, and it's about growing up as a non-Indigenous, white settler on Haida Gwaii, on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

There's a great conversation about the potential of Queen Charlotte having been Britain's first Black monarch. So very interesting kind of tensions between namings of islands of Black monarchs being transformed into renamings in the Haida language. And that sort of movement of language is something I'm quite interested in and it's reflected in this book of poetry, as I said, entitled *Lot*, which is about colonialism and different geographies and naming and language. This is a very brief excerpt from the book *Lot*:

We are on water. We land, we are on land, my mother and my sister, I step off the Queen of the North. There. Here. July, 1980. Another ship. Always we are arriving by ship.

A brig.  
A corvette.

With men.  
A sloop.

A frigate.  
With men.

With pelts.  
A vessel.

A ship.  
With gold.

The *Columbia*.  
With men.

The *Lady Washington*.  
With men.

The *Eleanora*.  
The *Union*.

The *Hancock*.  
The *Hope*.

The *Solitude*.  
The *Aransasu*.

The *Josephine*.  
The *William and Anne*.

The *Beaver*.  
With pelts.

The *Jefferson*.  
With pelts.

The *Vancouver*.

The *Una*.

The *Susan Stugis*.  
With gold.

The *Recovery*.  
The *Eagle*.

With men.  
With gold.

With pelts.  
With men.

**Lisa Dickson:** Thank you so much for giving us your time and your thoughts and giving us lots of things to think about in terms of the keywords that we ourselves have been struggling with and working with, ideas of hope and empathy and connection and the role of storytelling and the material effects of storytelling in the world.

And I also want to thank Shannon for coming and co-hosting with us today.

**Sarah deLeeuw:** Well, thank you, Lisa and Shannon. It's really been a humbling experience. I was, I was totally chuffed and honored to receive this invite. And thanks for the hard work that you guys are both doing. I'm so thrilled that these kinds of podcasts are in the world and thanks very much for allowing me to be a small part of them.

**Lisa Dickson:** Wyrd Words is made possible by the support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation and the Steven A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Our wyrd apprentice and technical producer is Cecilia Alain. Our intro and outro music for this episode is "Summer Pride" by Loyalty Freak Music, and this piece and the other incidental music in this episode are used under the creative commons license from freemusicarchive.org. See the show notes for details.