

TAKING THE MIC

Black British Spoken Word Poetry Since 1965
Aesthetics, Activisms, Auralities

18 November 2022

ABSTRACT BOOKLET





CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

08.30-09.00	Registration and Refreshments	
09.00-09.15	Welcome	Conference Committee and Julia Lajta-Novak, PI Poetry Off the Page (University of Vienna)
09.15-10.15	Panel 1: Experimental Embodiments: Choreopoems and Dance	Chair: Hannah Silva Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa , ‘Navigating the Enslaved Black Female Voice Through Dance’ Afrodita Nikolova , ‘Choreopoetic Experiments in Black British Poets: Voicing Intersectional Trauma’ Shefali Banerji , “‘Your Daughter's Face Is a Small Riot”: The Performance of Identity in Warsan Shire’
10.20-11.35	Panel 2: Amplifying Voices: Spoken Word Archives and Publishing	Chair: Natalie Fiawoo Panya Banjoko , ‘Nottingham Black Archive Recovering the Voices of Black Women Performance Poets through the Chronicle of Minority Arts (CHROMA) in Nottingham’ Laurence Byrne and Nicole-Rachelle Moore , ‘Black British Spoken Word Poetry in the archive’ Wolfgang Görtschacher , ‘Black British Spoken Word Poetry and the Poetry Industry’ Degna Stone , ‘On the Page, off the Page or Somewhere in Between?’
11.35-11.45	Break	
11.45-12.45	Keynote Address: Jay Bernard FRSL	
12.45-13.55	Lunch	
13.55-14.55	Panel 3: Aurality, Orality and the Avant-Garde	Chair: Shefali Banerji Rachel Bolle-Debessay , “‘dubbing in the rootsical, yard, basic rhythm that I-an-I know”: The Case of Dub Poetry’ Hannah Silva , ‘David J’s Vocal Pugilism’ Ronnie McGrath , ‘Acoustic avant-gardism, a twenty-minute performance on how to talk back Black poetry’
15.00-16.15	Panel 4: Collectives, Coteries, Networks: Challenges and Opportunities	Chair: Jill Abram Abíódún ‘Abbey’ Abdul , ‘Isolated Words: Black Kidult Poetry Journey’ Raquel McKee , ‘Opportunities and Challenges of Off-Page Edutainment in N.I.'s Literary World’ Carol Leeming MBE FRSA , ‘Black Spoken Word Poets of the East Midlands’ Melanie Abrahams Hon. FRSL FRSA , ‘This, That and the Other’
16.15-16.30	Break and Refreshments	
16.30-17.45	Panel 5: Beyond the Page: Poeticised Politics and Politicised Poetics	Chair: Deirdre Osborne, Hon. FRSL Kelsi Delaney , “‘Between worlds”: Stage, Page and the Politics of Medium in Poetry by Raymond Antrobus’ Pavĺína Flajšarová , ‘Political Engagement in Benjamin Zephaniah’s poetry’ Anna Osarose Harrison , ‘The Passage of Revival: Beryl Gilroy's Poetry in Prose’ Jessica Varela , ‘Poetry as Archive: A Black Feminist Reading of Una Marson's Diasporic Poems’
17.50-18.50	Keynote Address: Kayo Chingonyi FRSL	
18.50-19.00	Closing Remarks	
19.00-20.30	Principal's Reception and An Evening of Spoken Word Poetry Curated by Apples and Snakes and Renaissance One	



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KEYNOTE

JAY BERNARD FRSL

Went to Coventry (and all I got were some poems about Britain and Zebras)

In this paper, I take a walk through Coventry, the birthplace of 2Tone. 2Tone was a movement that emerged in the 1970s, blending Jamaican reggae with punk to create a new genre with an explicit anti-racist message. Decades after The Selector, tonic jackets and Thatcher, in the age of Rishi Sunak and Meghan Markle, I walk through Coventry's city centre, following Pete Chambers' Music Atlas. Alongside examples from British poetry, I discuss the process of writing two new poems that borrow from the playful spirit and rebellious intellect of 2Tone in order to think about how the vestiges of that movement manifest in Britain today.

BIO

Jay Bernard FRSA FRSL is an artist from London whose work is interdisciplinary, critical, queer and rooted in the archives. They were named Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year 2020 and winner of the 2017 Ted Hughes Award for *Surge*, a cross-disciplinary exploration of the New Cross Fire in 1981. As well as being a film programmer at BFI Flare, Bernard's short film *Something Said* has screened in the UK and internationally, including Aesthetica and Leeds International Film Festival, where it won best experimental and best queer short, respectively, as well as Sheffield DocFest and CinemAfrica. Recent work includes *Joint*, an-ongoing performance text related to the legal principle of joint enterprise, which premiered at the London Literature Festival 2022; *Crystals of this Social Substance*, a sound installation at the 2021 Serpentine Pavillion in which South London youth talk about money; and *My Name is My Own*, a physical performance piece in response to June Jordan, which premiered at Southbank Centre's Poetry International 2019. Jay currently lives between London and Berlin, and is a DAAD fellow of literature.

KAYO CHINGONYI FRSL

“It has to be music”: Generative Continuities - Black British Poetry and Black British Music

This talk considers the interleaved aesthetics of Black British Poetry and Black British Music with particular reference to the performance aesthetics of three poets whose work engages with the sonic milieu of Postwar Britain. Through close reading and close listening I will illuminate the connections between a disparate cast of Black British artists who, though they draw from a common stock, are rarely presented as part of an integrated, inter-expanding, tradition of sonically-engaged artistic practice.

Keywords: Black British Poetry In Performance, Dub Poetry, The Poetics of Grime, Rap Poetics, Sonic Modernity

BIO

Kayo Chingonyi FRSL was born in the Copperbelt of Zambia in 1987 and has lived in the UK since he was six years old. He is a fellow of the Complete Works programme for diversity and quality in British Poetry and of The Civitella Ranieri Foundation. In 2012, he was awarded a Geoffrey Dearmer Prize by The Poetry Society and was Associate Poet at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 2015. His first full-length collection, *Kumukanda*, won the Dylan Thomas Prize and a Somerset Maugham Award. Kayo was a Burgess Fellow at the Centre for New Writing, University of Manchester before joining Durham University as Assistant Professor of Creative Writing. He is a writer and presenter for the award-winning music and culture podcast *Decode* on Spotify, poetry editor at Bloomsbury, and his most recent collection *A Blood Condition* was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection, the T.S. Eliot Prize, and the Costa Poetry Award. His anthology of Contemporary Black British Poets, *More Fiya*, a companion volume to Lemn Sissay's *The Fire People*, was released by Canongate Books alongside a reissue of *The Fire People* in May 2022.



ABSTRACTS

PANEL 1: EXPERIMENTAL EMBODIMENTS: CHOREOPOEMS AND DANCE

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa, Navigating the Enslaved Black Female Voice Through Dance

There are no known first-handwritten accounts / biographies of enslaved African women in Barbados during The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. All documentation on the cultures, artistic expressions and behaviours of enslaved Africans and descendants were collated by colonialists and often vulgarised and associated with obeah (witchcraft). These depictions assisted in the cultivation of the colonial imagination of Black women and continues to permeate popular culture, despite numerous efforts to counteract stereotypical narratives. However, authors such as Captain Thomas Phillips (1704) and naturalist Griffith Hughes (1750) wrote detailed descriptions of dances / motifs, movements and physical behaviours. My research investigates the performances and nuanced descriptions of enslaved women in Barbados to identify and contextualise their narratives, expressions into text which have otherwise been obscured by misunderstandings and inaccurate translations. My approach demonstrates that studying the dances and body language of enslaved people can provide valuable and nuanced insight into their narratives, thoughts and emotions to rehumanise them. For this conference I intend to carry out a live performative demonstration as part of my interdisciplinary practice as a poet, dancer and cultural theorist.

I am working alongside The National Museum of Barbados and Historical Society and National Dance Theatre of Barbados to assist with the contextualisation. In this presentation I will share new findings and work carried out in Barbados. My research will be explored in my first collection *Cane, Corn & Gully* upcoming with Out-Spoken Press in November 2022.

As a neurodiverse (Autism, ADHD, dyslexia) Black British poet who was raised in the West-Indies, my practice and approach to performance is unique as it carries a practical purpose and pays homage to my cultural heritage. Spoken word and movement has long been a method of maintaining the narratives of enslaved people; however exploring the combination of movement and poetry has enabled me to develop a technique which helps me to write creatively. My demonstration will also contextualise the cultural significance of my approach and interrogate what it means to decolonise the page.

BIO

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa is a British born Barbadian raised poet, dancer and choreographer. Her interdisciplinary art, braids dance and poetry on the page and stage. She is also a PhD student in Cultural Studies. Safiya is an Obsidian Foundation fellow and an Apples & Snakes/ Jerwood Arts Poetry in Performance recipient. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals including *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review* and *Wasafiri*. Safiya is also a national and international spoken word champion and came third place in The London Magazine Poetry Prize (2022). Her first collection *Cane, Corn & Gully* is forthcoming with Out-Spoken Press in November 2022.



ABSTRACTS

Afrodita Nikolova, Choreopoetic Experiments in Black British Poets: Voicing Intersectional Trauma

This presentation will explore how the choreopoem - a form created by American poet and playwright Ntozake Shange - has travelled in the UK and inspired innovative cross-genre collaborations in contemporary Black British poetry. First, I will overview the origin of the choreopoem alongside some of its notable influences on contemporary spoken word in the US. This context will enable me to trace choreopoetic influences in Black British writing from Bernardine Evaristo's novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*; choreopoetry by Sonny Nwachukwu and Jonzi D. Secondly, I will offer a close creative-critical reading of the digital choreopoem 'Our Bodies Back' directed by Jonzi D, based on poetry by American poet Jessica Care Moore (poet's name intentionally not capitalised), from her poetry collection *We Want Our Bodies Back*. The choreopoem 'Our Bodies Back', produced during lockdown by Sadler's Wells' Digital Stage and Breakin' Convention, was described as "an empowering ode to Black womanhood; affirming experiences of pain and trauma as well as pride, power and beauty as lived by generations of Black women all over the world". My reading of the choreopoem blends literary and sociological analysis informed by Patricia Hill Collins's positioning of intersectionality as social theory to show the multifaceted function of dance, music, and words in reinventing poetic culture, and countering state-sanctioned violence. Then, I will discuss the implications of this work in relation to debates over the poetry canon in the UK. Finally, I will conclude with reflections on the reach of choreopoetic practice within research and pedagogy.

BIO

Afrodita Nikolova is an interdisciplinary social scientist and education researcher specialising in creative arts, youth education, social justice, and poetic inquiry. As an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow, she is working on a spoken word poetry project at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge where she completed her doctorate (Gates Cambridge Scholarship). She also worked for the Drug Policy Voices project at the Department of Sociology, MMU, and was selected as emerging European poet for the Versopolis platform.

Shefali Banerji, "Your Daughter's Face Is a Small Riot": The Performance of Identity in Warsan Shire

Building on the legacy of Black British women poets before her, Warsan Shire's work has taken the poetry world by storm, not merely in its written mode, but also through its oral and visual performance and its interdisciplinary mixed-media endeavours. This paper would particularly look at one such performance where Shire does not take the centre stage, but instead delivers her live recital in the backdrop, at the launch event of the Bloodaxe anthology, *Ten, the New Wave* at Southbank's Purcell Room on October 6th, 2014. Here, Shire recites the poem 'Ugly' away from the centre stage, while Ella Mesma performs an accompanying dance piece in the spotlight, a divergence from Shire's readings of the poems, 'Backwards', 'Midnight in the Foreign Food Aisle', and 'The House' at the same event, where the attention centres on the person of Shire. The calm of Shire's voice in juxtaposition to Mesma's dynamic movements, the strategic pauses and intakes of breath complemented by suspensions in Mesma's performance; and Shire's Somali heritage and British upbringing contrasted by Mesma's mixed British-Nigerian (white-passing) identity, all represent a politics of performance quite akin to SuAndi's portrayal of her white mother in *The Story of M*, that is starkly highlighted at the end of the performance when both performers unite and embrace on stage, and which would be examined in my presentation, that shall begin with the viewing of the performance recording.

BIO

Shefali Banerji is a poet, performer, and PhD researcher working on the ERC project "Poetry Off the Page" at the Department of English and American Studies, University of Vienna. Her wider research interests include Postcolonial Theory, 20th & 21st Century Poetry (print and stage), and Gender & Queer Studies.



ABSTRACTS

PANEL 2: AMPLIFYING VOICES: SPOKEN WORD ARCHIVES AND PUBLISHING

Panya Banjoko, Nottingham Black Archive Recovering the Voices of Black Women Performance Poets through the Chronicle of Minority Arts (CHROMA) in Nottingham

The performances of poets in Nottingham in the 1970s and 1980s were rarely recorded and, if they were, the recordings exist in forms that are now obsolete. Performances could not be preserved in the way that digital technology—smartphones, YouTube, and the Internet more broadly—ensures performances may be curated archivally now. The legacy of Nottingham women who performed poems and told stories as members of the Chronicle of Minority Arts (CHROMA) are now being surfaced by Nottingham Black Archive through oral histories. Black women harnessed performance poetry to inspire young people in Nottingham, in the belief that poetry was a tool through which cultural awareness might be developed and confidence instilled in the next generation. The writing collective CHROMA, initially funded by small grants to deliver Black arts to the community, was the first Black organisation in the city dedicated to arts produced by artists of African Caribbean and South Asian heritage. The cultural work of CHROMA had a material impact on student creativity and provided a stage from which Black women could make a difference. In CHROMA, women poets debated and discussed as they created, with men part of a collective conversation about the gendered nature of relationships. The collaborative context in CHROMA created opportunities to stretch one's thinking critically into theoretical debates, as well as engaging with ever-present social concerns. Through oral histories the stories of Black women performance poets once hidden as cultural producers and their impact on the city politically is now being amplified by Nottingham Black Archive.

BIO

Panya Banjoko is a poet, archivist, and PhD Researcher at Nottingham Trent University studying a practice-led PhD rooted in Nottingham Black Archive (NBA), the archive she founded in 2009. Since 2011 she has directed NBA on several pioneering projects, including bringing to the fore the narratives of Black Writers, community activists, and political poets in Nottingham since the 1950s. As a poet, her poems feature in numerous anthologies and exhibitions. *(Re)Framing the Archive* (Burning Eye Books) is her most recent collection of poetry.

Laurence Byrne and Nicole-Rachelle Moore, Black British Spoken Word Poetry in the Archive

This paper will provide an overview, and critical assessment, of the British Library's role in collecting Black British spoken word poetry and making it available to the public. It will consider how spoken word poetry resists the strict categories which libraries and archives typically impose, in that the Library's holdings of Black British poetry encompasses sound recordings, oral histories, archives, zines, and pamphlets as well as books. In order to understand a performance poet's creativity as a discreet body of work, it is necessary to explore the different formats across which their poetry has appeared, and consider the particular materiality inherent in, for example, a Linton Kwesi Johnson vinyl recording. The work of spoken word poets therefore requires that we understand poetry as an expanded form, no longer restricted to the page, and this in turn necessitates a rethinking of archival practices. It is also important to acknowledge the gaps that exist within the collections and examine the reasons for those. In doing so, we will explore how the British Library's collections demonstrate the central role that Black British poets and those who are rooted in the Caribbean and Africa but live and work in the UK have played in post-war British literature – from the British Poetry Revival to the current generation featured in Kayo Chingonyi's *More Fiya* anthology – and also the importance of independent publishers in providing a platform for spoken word poetry.

BIO

Laurence Byrne is a library worker who is currently a Curator for Printed Heritage Collections at the British Library. He previously worked as a Research Librarian for Latin American, Caribbean and Commonwealth Studies at Senate House Library, University of London and was formerly a Curator for Latin American Collections at the British Library.

Nicole-Rachelle Moore is the British Library's Curator of its Caribbean Collections. She has led courses on Andrea Levy and Toni Morrison, and worked closely with New Beacon Books and the George Padmore Institute. She co-edited *Dream To Change the World* on the life of John La Rose and contributed to the recently-published *In Search of Mami Wata: Narratives and Images of African Water Spirits*.



ABSTRACTS

Wolfgang Görtschacher, Black British Spoken Word Poetry and the Poetry Industry

Based on a discussion and critique of Danuta Kean's *Spread the Word Free Verse: Publishing Opportunities for Black and Asian Poets* (2006), this paper will consider some important examples of magazines and anthologies in the publication history of Black British spoken word poetry. The *Popular Front of Contemporary Poetry* (1992) celebrates a decade of Apples & Snakes, perhaps the most important platform and forum for British spoken word poetry at the time, with Black British spoken word poetry making an important contribution to the organisation's popularity and success. I still remember the impact Patience Agbabi's performance made on me when I attended her launch of *R.A.W* in September 1995 at Apples & Snakes. Another important anthology that helped bridge the distance between Black British spoken word poetry and its potential audience/readership is *The New British Poetry*, already published four years earlier by Paladin, which contains a Black British poetry section edited by Fred D'Aguiar. Among the magazines promoting Black British spoken word poetry I will discuss Michael Horovitz's *New Departures*, also in the context of his two anthologies *Children of Albion* and *Grandchildren of Albion*, as well as *Wasafiri*, perhaps the most important journal in the context of BAME writing. However, publications are not the only parameter helping to popularise Black British spoken word poetry. I will also consider poetry competitions, prizes/awards (e.g. Brunel International African Poetry Prize), The Complete Works mentoring scheme founded by Bernadine Evaristo and the related anthologies published by Bloodaxe, poetry festivals, and institutions such as Young Poet Laureate of London.

BIO

Wolfgang Görtschacher is Senior Assistant Professor at the University of Salzburg, Austria. He is the author of *Little Magazine Profiles* (1993) and *Contemporary Views on the Little Magazine Scene* (2000). He is a co-editor (with David Malcolm) of *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960-2015* (2021). He has published widely on British and Irish prose and poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is the editor of the poetry magazine *Poetry Salzburg Review* (2001-), co-edits the academic journal *Moderne Sprachen*, and is the director of the small press Poetry Salzburg.

Degna Stone, On the Page, off the Page or Somewhere in Between?

On the page, off the page or somewhere in between?

Why does the perception of a divide between page poetry and stage poetry persist? Who is keeping this old lie alive?

Last year I edited an issue of *The Rialto* dedicated to the task of putting this old lie in the bin. I put a call out that specifically spoke to this desire, and I hoped that it would reach performance poets and spoken word artists who might not have considered sending work to *The Rialto* in the past. And it did!

As I got on with the business of selecting poems for the issue, I put all notions of page vs stage to one side and allowed myself to simply read. To let myself be moved by the poems and to select the ones I most wanted to share. The result? A healthy and diverse balance of poems from poets who largely expect that their poems will be heard and those whose poems are more likely to be read.

So, how do we erase the battle lines of this phoney war? And do we really want to? Or is there an elitism of sorts on both sides? As a poet I choose to belong in both camps, but even so I'm often left wondering where I sit in a UK landscape that seems dominated by London voices. Questioning how I respond to the expectation that Black British poets must place their heritages front and centre in their work. Whether on page or stage, where do I fit in?

BIO

Degna Stone is an award-winning poet based in Gateshead. They are a contributing editor at *The Rialto*, a co-founder of *Butcher's Dog* poetry magazine, and a fellow of The Complete Works. Their writing pulls towards the dark seam of life, raising questions about social injustice and complacency. Their work explores a black British identity that exists without being subsumed by 'otherness'. They are concerned with the experiences of women – young girls, wives and mothers – and the dangers they navigate and rise against.



ABSTRACTS

PANEL 3: AURALITY, ORALITY AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Rachel Bolle-Debessay, “dubbing in the rootsical, yard, basic rhythm that I-an-I know”: The Case of Dub Poetry

The genre ‘dub poetry’ appeared in the early 1970s. The term refers to a type of Afro-Caribbean (originally Jamaican) and black British poetry which is performance-based but can be presented in different formats: a dub poem can be performed live or studio-recorded, with or without music; it can also appear without the performance in a print version. For artists and critics alike, rhythm is a key element that defines dub poetry. More precisely, it is the rhythm of reggae music that is recognised as a key element and as a space for creativity.

Yet, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, for instance, explained that this reggae music puts her poetry in the straightjacket of an imposed rhythm. Kwame Dawes, in his criticism of that poetic practice, also claimed that following a reggae rhythm, dub poems became quite predictable and standardised. Such views are interesting as they highlight a confusion between musical meter and poetic rhythm in the poetry itself but also in its historical development.

This presentation proposes an in-depth analysis of the relationship between these two dimensions. I will use the parameters of reggae structure to analyse the diversity in the poetic rhythm of a poem from Linton Kwesi Johnson. Moving from different versions, I will argue that an in-depth discussion of rhythm needs to be adapted to the artistic context of the poem. In doing so, the presentation has the broader scope of offering an analytical framework for the interpretation of rhythm in poetries paired with music.

BIO

Rachel Bolle-Debessay received her PhD in 2020 from King’s University, London. Her dissertation, *Dub Poetry: A Study Beyond Predefined Interpretations*, written under the supervision of Paul Gilroy, examines artistic characteristics that have made dub poetry an innovative form. As it offers new frameworks to analyse the aesthetic of dub poetry, it also opens doors for studying other types of poetry influenced by and performed with music.

Hannah Silva, David J’s Vocal Pugilism

This paper analyses the performance work of David J, an important player within a black British avant-garde and one of the pioneers of the spoken word scene in London.

I consider David J’s approach to freestyling, a mode of ‘live writing’ described by David J as ‘using the eye like a pen’ (interview with Silva for the British Library). I present a close listening of David J’s performance of ‘This is what we do’, discussing his vocal techniques, use of breath and hip hop battle-influenced freestyling.

David J has created his own kind of performance language, a form of wordplay, which draws on vocal effects and mirrors technological manipulations of the voice. The variety of David J’s vocal techniques and prosody can be viewed as ‘tonal semantics’ (Geneva Smitherman). Like Mikey Smith, whose ‘Laaawd’ is part of his signature style, David J’s set phrases and repertoire of distinctive vocal techniques have become the performance signature for ‘David J’. David J’s disruption of his ‘flow’ with vocal techniques and cuts between narrative lines draws our attention to the sound, materiality and skin of language. His performances reveal the extent to which a poet can write live using all elements of prosody. David J uses his body and voice like an instrument; watching David J in performance is like watching the instrument ‘David J’ being played.

BIO

Dr. Hannah Silva is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Queen Mary University of London. She has created an archive for the British Library consisting of twenty poets discussing the craft of poetry in performance, ‘Black British Poets in Performance’, supported by an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership with Stirling University. She is a poet and performer, known for her innovative use of sound, voice and technology.



ABSTRACTS

Ronnie McGrath, Acoustic avant-gardism, a twenty-minute performance on how to talk ~~back~~ Black poetry

I am an open text/a patchwork quilt of untreated fabulation/belonging exclusively to neither page nor performance/i am margin and centre folx/~~woke spoke~~/speech and muted gadget/~~black phallus~~/in between the binaries of no-mans/~~their~~ one's land/a formless thingy-me-jig without shores to cling to/a sagacious/liminal poet/subliminally Blak/Black/kmt/blk/ in the porous sense of my Britishness/i am an unfamiliar discernment/an abstract proposal speaking in gumbo talk/~~anti-apartheid~~/anti-poem/anti-mimesis/anti stage fright and presentation/a window exposing language/optophone of some radical improvisation reaching light years into the circle of things/ ***To what degree does Black British spoken word poetry offer an ongoing 'avant-garde'?***/~~this is a pipe~~/~~this is an appropriation/a sign referring to itself/ 'low it!'~~/let the performance speak for itself/let the tools of inquiry measure my serendipitous offerings/peer into the ~~this back~~-yard/count the bones inside the belly of Zong/are we in or are we out?/are we straight or were we born slant?/skibbi-di-beebop!

BIO

Ronnie McGrath (aka 'ronsurreal') is a socially conscious black neo-surrealist poet, writer, and visual artist. He teaches creative writing at various universities and non-traditional sites throughout the country. He has published work in Britain and America and continues the search for an 'authentic' form of Black British writing that is unashamedly bawdy, experimental, edutaining, and downright rebellious.



ABSTRACTS

PANEL 4: COLLECTIVES, COTERIES, NETWORKS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Abíódún ‘Abbey’ Abdul, *Isolated Words: Black Kidult Poetry Journey*

‘Isolated Words: Black Kidult Poetry Journeys’ explores how Black British spoken word poets can inspire children in less multicultural regions to use poetry as a conduit to process racism, like previous Scottish Poet Laureate **Jackie Kay**. Growing up in Scotland with the UK’s highest race-related murder rate, my Nigerian family’s life of attempted arsons and stabbings were not conversation for my primary school classmates talking about cartoons, toys and birthday parties. My mode of solitary racial expression became poetry, and being shortlisted for a 1990 anti-apartheid competition with the poem **‘Why?’** validated my soul. With **Benjamin Zephaniah’s** stimulating visit to Glasgow schools, I continued dealing with race in poetic isolation throughout my secondary school years with **‘The Sound of Freedom’** for South Africa’s first 1994 democratic elections and **‘Horizon’** exploring realigned identities. My latter secondary school years in Japan produced **‘Going Home’**...only for my UK ‘home’ to unceremoniously reject me the moment I returned.

University in England was my first experience dealing with race in community vs isolation. Motivated through local performances by **Grace Nichols**, I attended the African and Caribbean Society’s poetry evenings. In those creative spoken word spaces, I offered up **‘1st Days Lesson’** about systemic bias in education to surprisingly rapturous applause. Come graduation, I was less confident voicing such themes at work for majority white audiences. But after encouragement from **Roger Robinson** and the pandemic creating accessible online Black spaces, I developed cultural-appropriation rebuke **‘Strong Tea’** and continent-hopping celebration **‘Identity: Global Roots’** before performing them at literary festivals and more.

Stirred forward by these dynamic performance poets, these politicised poetic life strands are now entwined with the winding prose of my memoir-polemic **‘Stained Glass Eyes’** exposing my Black kidult journey of nevermore isolated words.

Sources:

The Scotsman, "Book Exposes 'Fantasy' that Scotland is Less Racist than the Rest of the UK", 08 May 2018, <URL: <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/book-exposes-fantasy-scotland-less-racist-rest-uk-1429748>>
Yorùbá Yonder: Publications, 'Stained Glass Eyes', <URL: <https://www.yorubayonder.com/p/publications.html>>

BIO

Abíódún ‘Abbey’ Abdul is a Yorùbá-Nigerian writer who won several poetry awards throughout childhood. Fascinated by how grammar could be bent to facilitate new meaning and enhance creative expression, she has worked for several years in higher education as an English Language Lecturer & Assessor across the globe. Most of her expressive writing is now **creative non-fiction prose**, and auto-ethnographical memoir-polemic in particular encompassing her schooling across three continents. But she still enjoys **composing poetry** focusing as ever on social justice and topics celebrating our common humanity, which have been included in various anthologies.



ABSTRACTS

Raquel McKee, Opportunities and Challenges of Off-Page Edutainment in N.I.'s Literary World

In this presentation, I will consider the realities of Dub Poetry and Off Page Edutainment seeking to hold its own in the literary landscape of the UK. This will be grounded in my own experiences and observations of the opportunities and challenges on the journey to success. In the process, I will consider the tensions of staying true to genre and staying true to the poet's voice and mission. This will be nuanced from the perspective of a migrant poet navigating the literary scene in the Northern Ireland context.

The presentation will:

- Give background to the poet, the poetry and the context
- Discuss the opportunities
- Assess the challenges
- Consider strategies for progress

BIO

Raquel is perhaps the foremost Caribbean born performance poet in Northern Ireland. She has been commissioned by Ulster Museum, Cuirt International Festival of Literature, amongst others. Raquel is on the John Hewitt Society Committee where she coordinated and hosted the first performance poetry event in its summer school history (2021), and the first virtual poetry event from an international location (2022). She is a Poetry in Motion Schools facilitator, a member of Poetry Ireland's Writers in Schools and of Women Aloud writers.

Carol Leeming MBE FRSA, Black Spoken Word Poets of the East Midlands

Some years ago, when Apples & Snakes' organization re-structured, it no longer had a regional coordinator specifically for the East Midlands region (a region busy with Black Revolutionary Spoken Word Poetry in the 80s). This resulted in a lack of active involvement in supporting regional Black Spoken Word Poets, in effect, an arrested development: a significant loss of direct support for their growth and development opportunities for them to progress their careers as Black Spoken Word Poets.

This debilitating career doldrums, continues very negatively to the present, affecting East Midlands Black Poets, who are in effect, despite considerable talent, denied access to opportunities to perform, to raise their profile, in the busy poetry metropolises of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Bristol. East Midlands Black Spoken Word Poets voices are therefore never heard, thereby not contributing contrasting voices and aesthetics to the national scene. As they lack direct access to influential gatekeepers: the interconnected business and social milieu of Black Spoken Word Poets and Spoken Word Poetry Promoters. This situation worsened in the aftermath of Covid 19 Lockdown.

To end on a positive, there is much to say regarding lineages, form and aesthetics, with regard to the enduring legacy for East Midlands Black Spoken Word Poets, of Dr. Jean Binta Breeze, when she located to Leicester in the region. Her poetic genius touched all of the East Midlands Black Spoken Word Poets in terms of aesthetics, performance, etc. Either directly as mentor and patron, or through her own thrilling performances, insightful workshops or conversations via a process of osmosis.

BIO

Carol is a successful multi-award-winning poet, playwright, composer, director, dramaturge, actor, world renowned singer-songwriter, performer, film maker, literary activist, curator and blogger. Having curated the likes of Jean Binta Breeze and Patience Agbabi in the 80s, her company, Dare to Diva Productions, stages plays and workshops all over the country. Carol works as a multi-disciplinary artist across literature, performing arts & digital media, and is also associated with Writers Mosaic. She has performed onstage in the company of Essex Hemphill, Dirg Aab-Richards, Paul Boakye, Zena Edwards, Salena Godden, Anthony Joseph, Khadijah Ibrahim, and has been a Lecturer of Performing Arts in BA & MA Creative Writing programmes at institutions such as DMU, Nottingham Trent & Derby.



ABSTRACTS

Melanie Abrahams Hon. FRSL FRSA, *This, That, and the Other*

My proposal is to present a performance lecture that can champion and speak of the spoken word scene in England and its communities whilst showcasing it through a (part) improvised format.

Spoken Word Poetry and Orature reaches audiences and people in ways that the book can't (or won't). There is data on the value of the book but spoken word remains a best kept secret as to its power and impact. The presentation will explore what that is, what it could be, and the value it can hold.

My talk will also touch upon the groundbreaking text *History of the Voice*, to examine the intersectionalities at the heart of spoken word poetry, which offers a means to reflect communities, their lived experiences and their talents.

It will also explore the gaps in narrative and canon - as there are always people and moments left out - as a means for celebration and charting my observations over two decades. In addition to artists, there are pioneers, curators, producers and creatives who have made Spoken Word an art, a cause or a personal commitment. Rather than the media's emphasis on 'star' performers, I will encourage a gaze on the eco-system, and the collegiate and sometimes invisible working amongst artists and non-artists which has made the genre what it is today.

As a child of the West Indians, I will explore Caribbeanness and voice and the hybridities in the Caribbean which challenge some definitions of identity and culture, whilst embracing the rich themes of the conference.

BIO

Melanie Abrahams Hon. FRSL FRSA is a spoken word curator, producer and agent has been nurturing the genre and collaborating with its finest artists, both independently and through Renaissance One. Artists include Bernadine Evaristo, Patience Agbabi, Kwame Dawes, Anthony Joseph, Malika Booker, Nick Makoha, Jean Breeze, Biyi Bandele, Fred D'Aguiar, Jay Bernard, Kayo Chingonyi, Hannah Lowe, John Agard and Grace Nichols. She curated the festival *Something I Said* with ten formats and forty artists (including Amiri Baraka), created spoken word meets carnival *Liming* series and is a producer for Colonial Countryside.

ABSTRACTS

PANEL 5: BEYOND THE PAGE: POETICISED POLITICS AND POLITICISED POETICS

Kelsi Delaney, “Between Worlds”: Stage, Page, and the Politics of Medium in Poetry by Raymond Antrobus

While performed poetry predates recorded poetry in our historical record, performance poetry is all too often an afterthought in critical discussions of poetic form. Oral mediums are frequently denigrated by critics as blunter instruments of poetic communication. It has been argued, for instance, that the instantaneity and ephemerality of performed poetry limits its value (Groff 2005). The existence of an indelible association between performance poetry and Black poets (Dawes 2003) highlights the racialised dynamics that sometimes inform how literary and academic critics form value judgments around the merits of different poetic forms and mediums. Set against a critical status quo that frames page and stage poetries as dichotomous, some Black British poets aiming for ‘literary’ recognition have therefore felt the need to distance themselves from the performance poetry tradition (Miller 2008).

This paper seeks to analyse these politics of medium in the work of Raymond Antrobus. Extending Cornelia Gräbner’s concept of ‘polysensual layering’ (Gräbner 2011), the paper juxtaposes stage and page versions of Antrobus’s poems. I argue that Antrobus’s enthusiastic adoption of an array of different mediums (printed poem, live performance, video recording) extends the dynamic range of his poetic craft—each medium presenting unique contributions to discussion of key themes emerging in his work, including D/deafness and racial and cultural identity. Through this juxtaposition, the paper highlights formal possibilities offered by stage poetries that are absent in print. Further, I advocate a reading practise that thinks beyond the stage page dichotomy by teasing out the interchange between mediums.

BIO

Dr Kelsi Delaney is a Postdoctoral Research Associate and Teaching Fellow at the University of Leicester, currently working on the AHRC-funded international collaborative research project, Representing Gender-Based Violence: Literature, Performance and Activism in the Anglophone Caribbean. Her PhD explored the cultural politics of form in contemporary anglophone Caribbean poetry. Kelsi is currently guest-editing a series of pamphlets by emerging Caribbean poets for New Walk Editions. She also sits on the advisory board for the BA Midlands Early Career Researcher Network.

Pavĺína Flajšarová, Political Engagement in Benjamin Zephaniah's Poetry

The poetry of Benjamin Zephaniah has always shown public engagement. The paper intends to explore the musicality and performative quality of his work. Apart from the artistic quality, his political activism, in his own word “street politics”, will be discussed. The attention will especially be paid to his “What Stephen Lawrence Has Taught Us”, both in terms of performance and the political context of Black British citizens. Attention will be paid to the performance’s emotional qualities that constitute a substantial part of the meaning of the poem being performed. As many of Zephaniah’s poems are partially improvised on the stage, the written text is only a subsequent manifestation of his poetry. Therefore, the paper will discuss the difference between performed and written versions of Zephaniah’s poetry in order to manifest that his performance is often influenced by the presence of audience to which he immediately reacts.

BIO

Pavĺína Flajšarová, Ph.D. is an associate professor at the Department of English at Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic. She serves as the Vice-Dean for International Relations at the Faculty of Arts. She has published several scholarly monographs, including *Poetry in Great Britain and Northern Ireland after 1945* (2007), *Diaspora in the Fiction of Andrea Levy* (2014), and *Grace Nichols Universal and Diverse: Ethnicity in the Poetry and Fiction of Grace Nichols* (2016). She translated Bernardine Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe* into Czech.



ABSTRACTS

Anna Osarose Harrison, *The Passage of Revival: Beryl Gilroy's Poetry in Prose*

There is something that happens when poetry leaves the page and becomes embodied, given a voice and performed; to some extent it is given agency. Performance poetry requires a speaker and receiver, and then it becomes a communal rather than solo phenomena. The collective experience, as well as the base and strength of community is integral in the black community. It is in the exchange and sharing where people find resistance, healing, learning, unlearning, and ways of survival.

[A conversation, park in South London, 25th August 2022]

Orality is a heartbeat in African and Asian history and tradition; bringing a story or experience to life through words, rhythm, sound and music is considered a part of life and culture. The act of bringing experiences to life through spoken word is evident in black British performance poetry, which does several things, some of which includes bearing witness to contested and forgotten histories and invoking the voices of black British poets and collectives. [1] If these are some of the outcomes of black British performance poetry - does all black British poetry carry the potential to pass through the passage from 'page' to 'performance' and take on the life of performance poetry? If yes, then that qualifies Beryl Gilroy's poems. One of the aims of this paper is to revive her work, like Michael Horovitz who organised poetry readings in Britain, proposing that poetry should be heard rather than read alone. [2]

Even though Gilroy's poetry was not specifically recognised or categorised as 'performance poetry', perhaps there is a need to recognise it as such, because her work bears witness to black British histories that have been muted in historic archives and public memory.

The poems that will be revived are from Beryl Gilroy's novel *In Praise of Love and Children* (1996) [3].

This paper will aim to celebrate some of these poems, root them within their historical context and begin to explore the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of black British performance poetry?
2. What can we learn from Gilroy's poems moving from page to performance?
3. Do we (academics, creatives, writers, historians, educators etc.) have a duty to revive Gilroy's poetry as 'performance poetry'?
4. To what degree do the poems in *In Praise of Love and Children* offer an ongoing 'avant-garde'?

Sources:

[1] https://takingthemic.univie.ac.at/?page_id=38

[2] Fowler, C. (2016). The Poetics of Spoken Word Poetry. In D. Osborne (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp.177-192). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.178

[3] Gilroy, Beryl. *In Praise of Love and Children*. London: Peepal Tree, 1996.

BIO

Anna qualified as an English teacher in 2009, and since then has been teaching in mainstream schools and alternative provisions. She has an MA in English Education (IOE, UCL) and recently obtained an MA in Black British History at Goldsmiths University.

ABSTRACTS

Jessica Varela, Poetry as Archive: A Black Feminist Reading of Una Marson's Diasporic Poems

In 1941, Una Marson carefully decided which poem to perform on the BBC program *Voice*, edited by George Orwell. She read 'Banjo Boy' (1937), which was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, thus fitting the broadcast's theme of American writing. Before discussions on the transnational nature of black British writing from the late 1990s would scrutinize distinctions between spoken and written poetry (Dawes 1996; 2003, Fowler 2016; Welsh 2019), Marson had to choose what to broadcast for the West Indies and what to publish for readers in Britain. Una Marson was a journalist, public speaker, broadcaster, playwright, editor, and poet whose life and writings offer critical insight into black women's "migratory subjectivities". Coined by Afro-Caribbean scholar Carole Boyce Davies (1999), migratory subjectivities allow us to read black women's writings across the diaspora by recognizing multiple geographical, temporal, and cultural crossings. Drawing from Delia Jarrett-Macauley's biography *The Life of Una Marson, 1905-65* (2010 [1998]) and Lisa Tomlinson's biography *Una Marson* (2019), this presentation divides Marson's poems into two categories: the BBC ones, in *Voice* and *Caribbean Voices*, and those published in her fourth poetry collection, *Toward the Stars* (1945). It compares 'Banjo Boy' ([1937] 1941) and 'At the Prison Gate' ([1942] 1945) with *Toward the Stars*' 'Politeness' (1945) and 'Little Brown Girl' ([1937] 1945), as each dialogue with literary styles in historically meaningful ways. These poems exemplify Marson's multiple crossings and interactions with Pan-Africanism, feminism, the Harlem Renaissance, and anti-colonial activism, thus allowing two conclusions to be drawn. First, Marson's rationale for broadcasting her less overtly political poems on the BBC demonstrates that she had to negotiate how to perform to the West Indies as a black woman writer based in London. Second, by editing and tailoring *Towards the Stars* (1945) to readers in Britain, Marson strategically considered how her written poetry should represent blackness, womanhood, and Jamaica to a possibly ignorant audience.

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BIO

Jessica Nogueira Varela is an Afro-Brazilian doctoral candidate in Comparative Gender Studies at the Central European University. Jessica is the current recipient of the CEU fellowship at Cornell University 2022/23. She graduated with a Master of Arts in 2020 for GEMMA – Erasmus Mundus + Master's Degree in Gender and Women's studies, graduating from the Central European University (CEU) and the University of Łódź. Jessica has a Teaching and a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences from the Federal University of Ceará in Brazil. Jessica presented her work at the 2019 edition of the AfroEuropean Conference in Lisbon, the 2019 Symposium on "Racialisation and Whiteness in Contemporary Europe" at the University of Iceland, the 1st University of Toronto Women and Gender Studies Graduate Conference in 2020, the third "Transforming Identities" Workshop organized by the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Stavanger in 2020, and the Decolonised Futures Conference 2021 organized by the St. Mary's University Twickenham London. She also wrote about Gender Studies in Hungary and Brazilian Elections in 2018. Jessica's main fields of interest are Black Feminism, Decolonial Theory, Critical Race Studies, and Migration Studies.



AN EVENING OF BLACK BRITISH SPOKEN WORD POETRY

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BOOKLOVE


After 15 years of working in the media, and with no publishing experience, Samantha was frustrated by the lack of diversity and cultural representation in TV and in books. This motivated her to create BookLove, a travelling multicultural book carnival that brings inclusive, anti-racist, multicultural, and bilingual adult and children's books, multicultural toys, and flags from around the world to schools, markets, festivals, and other events across the country.

Samantha is passionate about representing a range of cultures, with an emphasis on marginalised Black and Brown voices in adult and children's literature. There is massive under-representation across all media, especially within books, and BookLove seeks to highlight and amplify marginalised voices, characters, stories, and histories by bringing more representative books into our homes, schools, libraries, and bookshops. BookLove believes that broader and more accurate representation in books helps to empower and educate everyone within our beautifully diverse communities. The award-winning book carnival is now in its fifth year. BookLove also operates an online bookshop and sends out its parcels of books wrapped in pre-used packaging donated by customers.

BookLove recently started the campaign ***BookLove and Beyond***, which raises money to give free books to educational settings. Book lovers can support this mission by donating to their community interest company "BookLove and Beyond" which is also donating 20p from every book they sell to this new campaign.

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The RCSSD **communications, marketing, media, technical**
and **student usher teams**

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