

The PoP QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER #4

1/2023

**"Poetry Off the Page: Literary History and the Spoken
Word, 1965-2020" (ERC/FWF)**

Dear All,

We hope that you have all transitioned smoothly into the New Year. We are looking forward to a research-intensive year ahead and would like to take the opportunity to thank you for being part of a growing network of researchers, poets, and teachers who are interested in spoken word poetry.

Past Conference Activities

Taking the Mic: Black British Spoken Word Poetry Since 1965 Aesthetics, Activisms, Auralities

PoP was delighted to run its first conference on November 18th, 2022. The ‘Taking the Mic’ hybrid conference was co-convened by PoP Postdoctoral Researcher **Dr Emily Kate Timms**, **Dr Deirdre Osborne Hon. FRSL, Goldsmiths**, and **Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE**, and took place at the renowned Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), London. The atmosphere was electric as poets, creative practitioners, critics, students, editors, archivists, educators, and academics delivered compelling talks; engaged in lively question and answer sessions; or mingled over [BookLove](#)’s conference bookstall. With 100 in-person attendees and 150 online participants, the conference truly was a landmark celebration of a long and rich history of Black poetry in performance in Britain.

The conference’s 2 keynote lectures and 17 panel presentations explored the breadth and depth of Black spoken word poetry in the UK. Poets and practitioners were at the heart of the conference, and it was fantastic to see a wealth of creative presentations and performances throughout the day, before concluding with a powerful spoken word showcase co-curated by **Renaissance One** and **Apples and Snakes**. Above all, every participant testified to the creativity and vitality of Black poets and their central roles in making British poetry as we know it today.

Jay Bernard’s creative Keynote address took us on a walk through 1970s Coventry, the birthplace of the punk and Jamaican reggae-infused 2Tone music genre, and thought about how that movement – known for its playful and rebellious anti-racist aesthetics – has influenced their new creative work. In a related spirit, **Kayo Chingonyi**’s Keynote address was guided by the first line of Jacob Sam-La Rose’s poem ‘Manifesto AKA Poetry’: “It had to be music” – to consider the relationship between Black British poetry and Black British music in the performance work of Anthony Joseph, Belinda Zhawi, and Jay Bernard.

Many of the presentations were dedicated to performance practice and aesthetics. **Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa** opened the first panel with her interdisciplinary poetry and dance practice in order to re-contextualise the narratives of enslaved women in Barbados. (see image 1).



Image 1

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa; photo credit: Cam Harle Photography

It was followed by PoP PhD researcher **Shefali Banerji**'s presentation on Warsan Shire's collaboration with the dancer Ella Mesma; and **Afrodita Nikolova** and **Sasha Desouza-Willock** thought more broadly about the choreopoetic form in Black British poetry. Panel 3 dealt more closely with auralities: **Rachel Bolle-Debessay** offered a framework for interpreting poetics paired with music, particularly dub poetry; **Hannah Silva** explored David J's vocal techniques and prosodies; and **Ronnie McGrath** unpacked his practice of acoustic avant-gardism, complicating any easy designation of a Black British 'avant-garde'. **Pavlna Flajšarová**'s later presentation dwelled on Benjamin Zephaniah's use of improvisation as part of his activist aesthetics.

The collective focus on aesthetics was matched by presenters' preoccupations with the material lives of Black poets, and the circumstances in which Black spoken word is created, produced, published, and archived. For example, **Melanie Abrahams**

blended her perspectives on Caribbean orature with her experiences as a spoken word curator to trace the complexities of Spoken Word's 'eco-system' in England, and the potential power of spoken word poetry as an artform. Further presentations by **Wolfgang Görtschacher** and **Degna Stone** critically reflected on the relationship between Britain's poetry publishing industry and Black British spoken word, with the latter drawing on her special editorship of *The Rialto* as a challenge to enduring biases within poetry publishing. **Abíódún 'Abbey' Abdul** and **Raquel McKee** offered sensitive and critical accounts of their creative practice and how they relate to the challenges and opportunities facing Black poets performing their work in Britain's literary and educational landscapes.

Further panelists pursued recuperative strategies in their presentations by drawing attention to critically-neglected poetry communities and networks. **Panya Banjoko** explored how Nottingham Black Archive is foregrounding recordings of Black women's performance poetry as members of Nottingham's Chronicle of Minority Arts, while **Carol Leeming** MBE gave a powerful roll-call of Black spoken word poets from the East Midlands. (see image 2)



Image 2

Carol Leeming, MBE photo credit: Cam Harle Photography

Leeming's presentation opened questions about various asymmetries of power underpinning Britain's poetry infrastructure, a point also made in **Laurence Byrne** and **Nicole-Rachelle Moore**'s reflexive examination on the British Library's

acquisition processes for Black Spoken Word poets. Questions surrounding archiving and canonicity were revived in the final panel of the day as **Anna Osarose Harrison** and **Jessica Varela** reclaimed important figures in Black British literature – Beryl Gilroy and Una Marston respectively – as poets who should be interpreted through the lens of performance.

The day reached a crescendo with a wonderful Principal's reception and a special evening of Black spoken word. The showcase was a collaboration between Renaissance One and Apples and Snakes, hosted by **Melanie Abrahams** and **Peter deGraft-Johnson, aka The RepeatBeatPoet**.



Image 3

Melanie Abrahams and The RepeatBeatPoet

Photo Credit: Cam Harle Photography

The evening took the audience on an intergenerational journey of Black British spoken word, interweaving emerging poets **Rheima Robinson**, **Chrissie Okorie**, and **Makella Ama**; established figures **Michael Brome** and **Jay Bernard**; and archival materials of Black British performance poetry. **Marcus Joseph**, who also accompanied Brome on the saxophone, finished with a magnificent musical tribute to Jean 'Binta' Breeze, bringing the latter's voice into RCSSD's New Studio in a poignant, yet celebratory and joyous, end to the day.

We want to thank the keynote speakers Jay Bernard and Kayo Chingonyi, presenters, showcase performers, panel chairs, student ushers, and all participants

as well as Poetry off the Page, Goldsmiths, Renaissance One, Apples and Snakes and conference assistant **Shannon Navarro** for their hard work, and, of course, RCSSD and Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE for their generous hospitality and facilitation.

Further information on the conference can be found here:

<https://takingthemic.univie.ac.at/>

Emily Timms and **Deirdre Osborne** are very much looking forward to working on a journal Special Issue arising out of the conference, and many speakers have agreed to stay in touch with each other. So we are very excited to see where this community is headed next!

Future Conference Activities: save the date November 11th -12th, 2023

Our second conference, 'All Borders Blur': Mapping Intersections and Genre Crossings in UK Spoken-Word Poetries (1965-present day), will be organized by **Dr. Shalini Sengupta** (postdoctoral researcher, PoP) along with **Andrea Brady** (Professor of Poetics) and **Peter Howarth** (Professor of Modern Literature) at Queen Mary University of London.

The conference is scheduled to be a two-day event over November 11th-12th 2023, and will feature a diverse range of panels/workshops, long tables, round tables, and an evening of live poetry on the 12th of November in London.

Past PoP Research Activities

Martina Pfeiler conducted research at the British Library and the National Poetry Library in London. She also interviewed poet and organizer Russell Thompson at the Apples&Snakes archive in Deptford, London. On December 19th, 2022, Martina Pfeiler has been invited to contribute to a colloquium on "Spoken Word and Poetry Slams in an International Perspective", organized by Dr. Henrik Wehmeier as part of the ERC Poetry in the Digital Age project at the University of Hamburg. Her examples centered on the Kat François' and Eliza England's spoken word poetry within the context of broadcasting and live-streaming poetry slams. She also enjoyed participating in lively discussions on poetry slams hosted in Brazil and Germany and she is looking forward to continuing these international conversations.

On November 18th 2022, **Shefali Banerji** presented the paper "'Your daughter's face is a small riot": The Performance of Identity in Warsan Shire" at the "Taking the Mic" Conference at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD), London.

On December 2nd 2022, Shefali presented the paper "'So where are you from?' The unbelonging of place meets the unbelonging of form in Roger Robinson's Shadow Boxer" at the Poetic Justice Value project's "Going Places" Conference (December 2nd-3rd) at Faculty of Education, Homerton College, University of Cambridge. Shefali was also a delegate of the project's "Creative-Critical Methods For(u)m" from October through December, and participated in webinars and workshops such as 'Lived Experiences, Hybrid Playwriting & Grime Poetics' with Deborah 'Debris' Stevenson, 'Introduction to Choreopoetry' with Jonzi D, 'Spirituality & Social Justice – A Critical Poetic Call & Response' with Dr. Camea Davis, and so on.

Russell Thompson, our liaison archivist at Apples&Snakes, has completed the digitisation of all remaining analogue recordings of the Spoken Word Archive.

In the past months, **Julia Lajta-Novak** has also struck up collaborations with the spoken word organisation Renaissance One and the National Poetry Library to extend the range of the PoP team's archival work. We are excited to examine these new materials in the near future.

On October 5th 2022, **Claire Palzer** publicly presented her doctoral work as part of the Dies Doctoralis of the University of Vienna, as required by university statutes. Her topic, "Spoken Word Poetry in Ireland: Placing Voice in Performance" was approved by the director of the doctoral study programme. With all the valuable feedback provided by the PoP team and the attendees of the public presentation, she is moving forward with great enthusiasm.

Upcoming PoP Research Activities

Shefali Banerji will be visiting the UK in January to begin her archival research and interviewing phase. She will be staying there until mid-February and is looking forward to engage in these first steps of her doctoral research. Want to share ideas or collaborate in this duration? Feel free to reach out to her at shefali.banerji@univie.ac.at

Martina Pfeiler is looking forward to attending the Scottish Poetry Slam Finals in Glasgow and interviewing poets in Scotland between March 15th and 23rd. Feel free to contact her at martina.pfeiler@univie.ac.at if you are a slam organizer, MC, or poet who regularly participates in slams and would like to connect with her and share your work as part of an interview. Her paper "(Post-)Covid Intermissions: Live-Streaming Poetry Slams in the UK in the 'New Digital 'Public' Sphere' has been accepted at the conference "[Audioliterary Poetry between Performance and Mediatization](#)" (University of Hamburg, May 11th -13th, 2023).

Shalini Sengupta will be in the UK from January 20th until February 10th for archival work and poet interviews across Brighton, Birmingham, and London. She's looking forward to expanding PoP's archive with new research on avant-garde poetries & performance and being in conversation with poets/scholars who were active during the British Poetry Revival decades stretching from the 1960s until the mid-1980s.

If you have any questions about our research activities or the project at large, please contact us at pop.anglistik@univie.ac.at. The best way to keep updated with our current activities is to follow our Twitter account.

Sincerely yours,

The PoP Team

Feel free to pass on the sign-up for our Newsletter [here](#) | Follow us on [Twitter](#) | E-Mail us at pop.anglistik@univie.ac.at |