

TAKING THE MIC

Black British Spoken Word Poetry Since 1965

Aesthetics, Activisms, Auralities

18 November 2022

CONFERENCE REPORT

Dr. Emily Kate Timms

emily.timms@univie.ac.at

University of Vienna

POETRY OFF THE PAGE (ERC / FWF)

Department of English and American Studies

Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies

Spitalgasse 2-4

1090 Vienna, Austria

POETRY
OFF THE PAGE



FWF

Der Wissenschaftsfonds.

ROYAL CENTRAL

SCHOOL OF SPEECH & DRAMA

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



universität
wien

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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

The Poetry off the Page project (PoP) hosted 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 University of London**, 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 celebration of a long and rich history of Black poetry in performance in Britain, and was an event that followed on from many decades' of gatherings by Black British poets, creatives, critics and academics.

The conference's two keynote lectures and seventeen panel presentations explored the breadth and depth of Black spoken word poetry in the UK. **Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE** opened the day with a warm welcome to delegates, followed by introductory remarks from PoP Director **Dr Julia Lajta-Novak**. 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 (*image 1*) 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.



Image 1

Kayo Chingonyi FRSL; photo credit: Cam Harle Photography

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 African women in Barbados. (See *image 2*).

Kinshasa's presentation was followed by PoP PhD researcher **Shefali Banerji**'s presentation on Warsan Shire's collaboration with the dancer Ella Mesma; and **Afrodita Nicolova** and **Sasha Desouza-Willock** thought more broadly about the choreopoetic form in Black British poetry. Panel 3 engaged more closely with aurality: **Rachel Bolle-Debessay** offered a framework for interpreting poetries 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 to complicate any easy designation of a Black British 'avant-garde'. **Pavlna Flajšarová**'s later presentation considered Benjamin Zephaniah's use of improvisation as part of his activist aesthetics.



Image 2

Safiya Kamaria Kinshasa; photo credit: Cam Harle Photography

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. 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.

Other 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 rollcall of Black spoken word poets from the East Midlands. (see *image 3*)



Image 3

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 revisited 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 4*).

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.



Image 4

Melanie Abrahams and The RepeatBeatPoet; Photo Credit: Cam Harle Photography

The convenors thanked RCSSD and Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE for their generous hospitality and facilitation, conference assistant Shannon Navarro for her indefatigable work, the keynote speakers Jay Bernard FRSL and Kayo Chingonyi FRSL, presenters, showcase performers, panel chairs, student ushers, and all participants as well as Poetry off the Page, Goldsmiths, Renaissance One, and Apples and Snakes for making Taking the Mic possible.

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. It is truly exciting to see where this community is headed next!