

*Taking the Mic*  
*Black British Spoken Word Poetry Since 1965*

**Aesthetics, Activisms, Auralities**

Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, UK.

Friday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2022

**Keynote Speakers: Carolyn Cooper, Professor Emerita, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica  
and Jay Bernard, Writer and Artist, Berlin and London**

**EXTENDED Deadline for Abstracts: 15<sup>th</sup> August 2022 | [www.TakingTheMic.net](http://www.TakingTheMic.net)**

Black British\* poets have long pushed the aesthetic and sonic boundaries of performance in spoken word poetry, creating a compelling public voice for poetry. The legacy of this work both on and off the page follows diasporic routes in and out of Britain from Una Marson to James Berry, from the Caribbean Artists Movement to Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, John Agard, and Roger Robinson through to the twenty-first century poets Patience Agbabi, Jay Bernard, Anthony Joseph, Raymond Antrabus, Warsan Shire, and Caleb Femi to name a few. While fashioning electrifying performance personae, Black British spoken-word poets have equally claimed, redefined, or rejected the term ‘performance’. In his classic essay, Kwame Dawes (2005) argued that ‘the position of the black poet in Britain has become inextricably linked to notions of “performance poetry”’ and that this association inhibits recognition of the fact that many poets were writing for print publication. In response Corinne Fowler (2016) reflects, ‘The lack of parity between so-called “page” and “stage” poets points to a long-running, unresolved argument in Britain about what poetry is, and who it is for, an argument that reaches back to the British poetry revival of the 1960s.’

To what degree does Black British spoken word poetry offer an ongoing ‘avant-garde’? From the Black People’s Day of Action to #BLM, to decolonising the curriculum, spoken word poetry plays significant roles in Black activism; bears witness to contested and forgotten histories; and imagines new futures, communities, and belongings to numerous cultural lineages. To rhyme, rap, or speak of poetry performance, its lyrical forms, beats, and bars is also to invoke the voices of Black British poets and collectives across Britain’s geographical breadth. From Grace Nichols’s meditations on the English countryside, to the Mancunian Blackscribe Black feminist poetry collective; Khadijah Ibrahiim’s poetic histories of Chapelton and Harehills, and Benjamin Zephaniah’s accounts of Brummagem; to Eric Ngalle Charles’s negotiations with his adopted ‘home’ in Wales to Jackie Kay as Scotland’s Makar; or Caleb Femi’s testimony to North Peckham— these locales, regions, and their nations reveal the multiple genealogies of Black British spoken word poetry’s performance communities.

Thus, it is timely for poets, academics, and critics alike to ‘take the mic’ and embark on a sustained examination of Black British spoken word poetry and the relationships that might be traced between its aesthetics, activisms, and auralities. This one-day conference combines critical and creative perspectives and invites 20-minute papers, presentations, panels and/or performances exploring any aspect of Black British spoken word poetry in performance since 1965. Such presentations may include, but are not delimited to, explorations of Black British performance aesthetics, audience interactions, performance reception, education, and engagement with creative industries.

The conference will form the basis for a special issue with a scholarly journal. This conference is a **free event** with options for remote attendance. There are limited travel subsidies available.

**Please email abstracts of no more than 250 words and a short biographical note (80 words)\* to:**  
[takingthemmic2022@univie.ac.at](mailto:takingthemmic2022@univie.ac.at)

**Convenors: Dr Deirdre Osborne FRSA (Goldsmiths) Dr Emily Kate Timms (University of Vienna)**

**Josette Bushell-Mingo OBE (Principal, Central School of Speech and Drama)**

**Conference Assistant: Shannon Navarro (Central School of Speech and Drama)**

We invite papers across a broad spectrum of interests, critical and creative, that engage with spoken-word poetry, poetry in performance, intersections of poetry with curating, festivals and publishing. Areas of discussion might connect with the following ideas:

### **1) Poeticised Politics and Politicised Poetics**

From the postwar period, Caribbean-heritage poets forever transformed Anglophone poetry offering an enduring and powerful legacy of the relationship between politics and poetics, and the ways in which Black poet's voices occupied public arenas for articulating racial and cultural justice. While migratory generation poets viewed Britain through a bi-focal creative lens formed from colonial education and anti-colonial politics, they also turned an unsparing gaze towards British society. To what degree does the legacy of anti-racist protest remain a catalyst for crafting new forms, perspectives and possibilities for the performance of poetry? How has Black British poetry performance functioned as an alternative form of witnessing across post-1965 history?

### **2) Collectives, Coteries, Networks**

Danuta Kean's *Spread the Word Free Verse: Publishing Opportunities for Black and Asian Poets* Arts Council Report (2006) confirmed mainstream publishers' historical neglect of Black British spoken word poetry. To counteract this exclusion, leading Black British spoken word artists formed networks such as Malika's Kitchen and The Complete Works collective to nourish and develop their work. As digital performances and social media have opened up a global reach for Black British spoken word, where and to whom are these collectives performing? To what degree does Black British spoken word poetry cultivate new and nuanced solidarities regarding LGBTQIA+ perspectives, disabled people's experiences, care experienced lives, environmental activism and awarenesses?

### **3) Hearing, Seeing, Performing**

Black British Spoken word poetry has also drawn on a variety of performance traditions and spaces such as Caribbean Carnival, reggae, rap, and utilising instrumentation and dramatic techniques. The nuances of tone, complex rhyming patterns, and vocal flows around the beat in grime, links music and the voice in new forms of lyricism that 'has given people a vehicle to express themselves, often in a language that's radically different from standard english' (Kayo Chingonyi 2016). A number of poets have also created powerful poetic dramas that place spoken-word techniques in the heart of British theatre. How is voice, voicelessness and/or silence deployed in performance? What is the significance of embodiment in Black British spoken word poetry? How can a new critical lexicon evolve to engage with this polyphonic and polygeneric work?

### **4) Transnational Translations and Diasporic Echoes**

In *Spoken Word In the UK* (2021), Nick Makoha conceptualises his vision of 'metic' poetry, work that navigates 'points of departure, return, and initiation' and provides 'an artistic opportunity to break through the myth of national identity'. Black British spoken word poets negotiate and celebrate a range of diasporic identities, heritages, and aesthetic influences. What are the influences of African-American Jazz Poetry? Have Poetry Slams generated transnational innovations in spoken word poetry performance? How can Black British spoken word poetry be placed in relation to Pan-Africanism, Afropeanism and Afrofuturism?

### **5) Bearing Witness: Audiences and Archives**

Black British poetry performance often enacts and elicits modes of witnessing, a situation that can turn the audience 'into a collective *voyauditeur*' (Carolyn Cooper, 1995). How might audiences bear witness to the performer? What dynamics of testifying and response can occur in these exchanges? How does spoken word poetry bear witness to submerged imperial-colonial and Black British histories, intervening in contemporary injustices, and reframing narratives of nationhood? How do these recuperative efforts at 'Mekkin Histri' (Linton Kwesi Johnson) also speak to new and speculative (Afro)futures? Does poetry act as a form of archive in the absence of tangible archives? What is the effect of (re)presenting the archives as performable?

## 6) Double Vision: Spoken Word, the 'Canon' and Decolonising the Curriculum

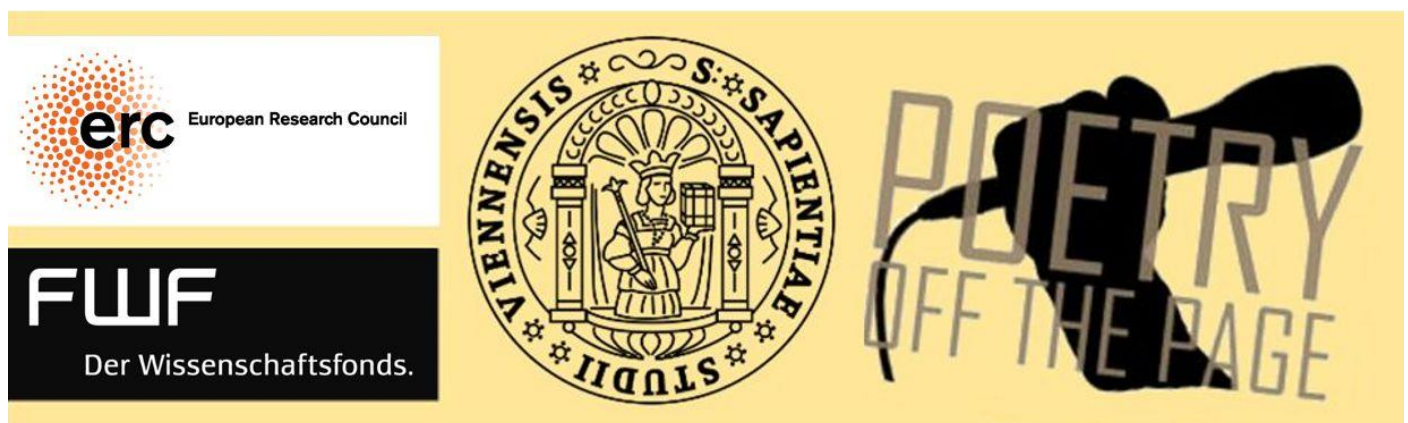
Black British poets have combined the richness of diasporic sensibilities and literary heritages that have profoundly transformed British national culture, leading to a more complex and inclusive sense of its past. This has not been comprehensively reflected in mainstream publishing or the content of educational curricula. As the interest in spoken word has grown, the opportunities for studying poetry at school in the UK is diminishing as it becomes increasingly optional. Has Black British spoken word poetry altered the canon? What roles have independent presses such as Flipped Eye, Inscribe (Peepal Tree Press), Bloodaxe, SAKS Media and Burning Eye Books played in giving publication platforms to Black poets who fall under the spoken word category?

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\*With the submission of your proposal you consent that any data you submit will be saved by the organisers until the end of 2022. Your email will be used for the limited purpose of informing you about updates and news relating to the conference and will not be passed on to any third parties.

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