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Intersecting Practices and Traditions in Poetry Performance: Interviews with Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Anthony Joseph and Marsha Prescod

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In these interviews, the contemporary poets, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Anthony Joseph and Marsha Prescod, reflect upon their performance practice. They discuss the ways in which their innovative poetry performance and spoken word styles intersect and engage with literary and cultural traditions and art forms such as music, story-telling, carnival, the visual arts, history and politics.

Introduction

Although still fairly rare, interviews with performance poets living and working in Britain reveal valuable information about their creative and performance practices. In these interviews, the contemporary poets, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Anthony Joseph and Marsha Prescod, reflect upon their performance practice. They discuss the ways in which their innovative poetry performance and spoken word styles intersect and engage with literary and cultural traditions and art forms such as music, story-telling, carnival, the visual arts, history and politics. These interviews were conducted as part of the 'Poetry Off the Page' project, directed by Dr. Julia Lajta-Novak (University of Vienna) and carried out in collaboration with the poetry organisation Apples & Snakes, Goldsmiths University of London, the Centre for Poetry at Queen Mary University of London, and University College Dublin. The interview format was developed in consultation with the poets, Patience Agbabi, Kat François, Amerah Saleh, Benjamin Zephaniah, and the archivist Russell Thompson from Apples & Snakes, one the main organisations promoting spoken word and poetry performance in Britain.

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan is a British spoken word poet, writer and public educator. She was born in Bradford to second-generation British-Pakistani parents and grew up in West Yorkshire. She studied history at Cambridge University and completed an MA in Postcolonial Studies at SOAS, London. Manzoor-Khan's poetry has appeared online, on television and on radio. 'This Is Not a Humanising Poem' won second place in the final of the Round House Poetry Slam at the Last Words Festival in London in 2017 and her debut poetry collection, *Postcolonial Banter*, was published with Pluto Press in 2019. Manzoor-Khan's critical works include *Tangled in Terror: Uprooting Islamophobia* (2022) and *Seeing for Ourselves: And Even Stranger Possibilities* (2023). She has also contributed to anti-racist anthologies, including *I Refuse to Condemn* (2020) and *Cut from the Same Cloth?* (2021), and is co-author of *A Fly Girl's Guide to Univeristy at Cambridge and Other Institutions of Power and Elitism* (2019) with Odelia Younge, Lola Olufemi and Audrey Sebatindira. Manzoor-Khan's first full-length play, *Peanut Butter and Blueberries*, focusing on the lives of two young British Muslims, premiered at the Kiln Theatre, London in 2024.

Anthony Joseph is a Trinidad-born, London based poet, musician, novelist and academic at King's College London. Joseph has released eight albums, including *Rowing Up River to Get Our Names Back* (2025), *The Rich Are Only Defeated When Running* (2021) and *Time* (2014). His published verse novels and fictional biographies include *The African Origins of UFOs* (2006), *The Frequency of Magic* (2019) and *Kitch: A Fictional Biography of a Calypso Icon* (2018). His poetry collections include *Desafinado* (1994), *Teragaton* (1997), *Bird Head Son* (2009), *Rubber Orchestras* (2011), *Precious and Impossible: Selected Poems*

(2024) and *Sonnets for Albert* (2022). Joseph was awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize for *Sonnets for Albert* in 2023 and received the 2023 OCM (One Caribbean Media) Prize for Caribbean Poetry, the Paul Hamblyn Foundation Composers Award (2020) and a Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship in 2019.

Marsha Prescod appeared at 39 Apples and Snakes Poetry Performances between 1982 and 1997. Her poetry collection, *Land of Rope and Tory* was published by Akira Press in 1985 and her poems and essay were printed in *Let it Be Told: Black Women Writers in Britain,* edited by Lauretta Ngcobo (Virago Press, 1988). Other publications include her poem, 'Big Time', in the Apples and Snakes anthology, *The Popular Front of Contemporary Poetry Anthology* (1992) and a collection of sci-fi short stories entitled *The Afro-Saxon Chronicles* (2020).

Interviews

1) Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Poetry Performance & Intersecting Practices

This is an edited extract of the interview between Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan and Dr Helen Thomas that took place on 5 September 2024 as part of the 'Poetry Off the Page' project.

HT: Suhaiymah, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed today. To begin, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your career, particularly in relation to poetry performance. How has spoken word poetry impacted your life?

SMK: Thank you so much. I can't think of another art form that has that power. I think poetry – being a poet, listening to poetry, hearing poetry, being inspired by poets, allows me to air academic and intellectual questions. It allows me to approach them differently, and – crucially – encourages me to always be honest. I think in writing, especially academic writing, that isn't encouraged. Poetry allows me to not be afraid to have more questions, rather than that impetus to be conclusive and sure at the end. All these things I see as types of freedom. Even the ways that you interact with people. I think poetry encourages you to be so much more compassionate and loving. For me, poetry is about complexity.

HT: Which topics or issues would you say have interested you the most throughout your career?

SMK: I think it's always been that personal-political mesh. I would say the real topic is 'myself navigating the world', as it is manifested in racism, Islamophobia, sexism. When you're performing poetry, you are so visible in the body you're in. I've never

felt that the writing has been separate from that visibility. The topics that preoccupy me include being seen, how I'm perceived, how others are perceived, how narratives shape how we are perceived. I'm also interested in history. I find poetry to be a way to translate history and politics, to make them feel more accessible. You can expose the violence much more swiftly or clearly.

HT: Which poets do you admire as performers?

SMK: I came into poetry at the same time that I was discovering Black feminism – so writers like bell hooks and Audre Lorde who were steeped in race and class and African-American culture. Which is interesting because I don't think I was as influenced by British voices or maybe I just didn't know or wasn't exposed to them. But also I admired the poets that my grandparents listened to, Urdu language and Punjabi language songs. Islamic history is so replete with poets: famous Punjabi poets such as Bulleh Shah. He's seen as a Sufi scholar, a dervish, someone whose poetry is replete with spiritual references. What I like about that style is writing to oneself, writing to one's own soul, calling upon oneself. My granddad used to quote Allama Iqbal. In the present day, you have Abida Praveen, a well-known Pakistani qawwali singer. Qawwali has been such a normalised part of South Asian culture that is inherently poetic. A nasheed is praise poetry sung about the prophet. It has a really strict metre that is like Arabic poetry and is very structured.

HT: Are there any other performance traditions that have a bearing on your work?

SMK: I think the confluence between Punjabi diaspora and arriving in Yorkshire does. There's something about both Yorkshire dialect and Punjabi dialect that is so adapted to storytelling. There's a certain way that both those languages characterise other people with dialogue and use storytelling. You'd say, 'And she was like' and then you would put on this voice. I think dialogue has always just felt so easy and natural to reproduce for me. In my family, that is literally what so much of our conversation is – just reproducing dialogue that we've heard. So I've always been curious about storytelling in general and my grandparents coming from this oral culture. My childhood has been really full of stories being told.

HT: And in terms of literature, what has influenced you?

SMK: I have always really enjoyed reading, but quite widely. I think my literary influences were less poetic and more polemically political. Malcolm *X's Autobiography* – that was life changing. Toni Morrison's writing style; that detail – I'd never read anything like that. I think what I admired more generally were people. Again, I'd say Malcolm X – being honest, speaking truth to power, that kind of thing. I would literally

read an academic article and then think, how can I translate this into a piece of poetry? I was really inspired by Yassir Morsi, who wrote a book called *Moderate Skins, Radical Masks* [*De-radicalising the Muslim and Racism in Post-Racial Societies*] which is a play on Fanon. And writers like Fanon.

HT: And have there been any other poets or artists with whom you have collaborated?

SMK: I think probably the person I've collaborated the most with is a visual artist, not a poet: my friend, Alaa Alsaraji. She's a British-Iraqi visual artist and we used to facilitate workshops together, combining the verbal element and the visual element. I really enjoyed collaborating like that.

The other element of community or collaboration that I've really felt comes from zine culture. That experience of collaborating with people setting up their own zines. That's been something that has always made me feel that I'm still able to be in grassroots spaces where, you know, someone might say: hey, let's do a quick interview, or let's do a quick film.

HT: What can you do in performance that you can't do in writing?

SMK: It's so embodied, isn't it? The best way to describe it is how it feels. I think with performance, it feels like you can grab someone by the scrap of their neck and you can really shake them. I think it's something about the physicality of having that person in front of you, that eye contact, the facial expressions, the voice, that does so much, I think, to stir hearts. As the writer and performer, you are seeing people receive your words in a physical sense, seeing them engaged or disengaged. Seeing them respond to how you say the words and how you introduce the work. Whereas, I think writing doesn't feel like that. Writing feels a bit like you've presented it, your bit is done and it's now up to the reader. Whereas performance allows you to pace it as well and say:

> I really want you to sit with this.
> I really want you to hear this and also to see me.
> I really want you to see and be seen.

Even just being in the room with the person. I think it's something about physical presence and sharing presence; gathering together. I can't even put it into words but I just think it allows so much to be felt and shared. I think it's so much more intimate. There's a vulnerability that's being shared, that it's happening in the now. It creates for that moment a unique relationship, that I don't think exists anywhere else, between performer and audience. I don't think even the most moving piece of literature can do that in the same way.

HT: What advice would you have liked to have been given at the start of your career?

SMK: Trust your instincts, which sounds really basic, but essentially: don't write what you think you should write. Write the thing that you want to write and let it speak for itself, rather than feeling that you have to rush into every opportunity that's been given to you. And be mindful that not everybody is getting in touch with you because they love the poetry. There may also be ulterior motives. You know, 'It's so handy that you're visibly a Muslim woman'. And in the times that we're in, many people will want to capitalise on that.

2) Anthony Joseph, Poetry Performance & Intersecting Practices

This is an edited extract of the interview between Dr Anthony Joseph and Dr Helen Thomas that took place at King's College London on 18 March 2024 as part of the 'Poetry Off the Page' Project.

HT: Good afternoon, Anthony. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. To begin, I'd like to ask how you came to poetry?

AJ: I came to poetry through a love of music. I was in secondary school, I was about 11 and I was a fan of music. We had some records at home and I would listen to the radio a lot – this would have been about 1978 or something like that – and I was into pop music like a lot of kids at that time. I remember being really fascinated by the lyrics of these songs. At some point, I remember the day, I remember actually sitting down and thinking, I'm gonna try to write a song. And I started writing lyrics, song lyrics. I first started writing lyrics to songs that already existed. That's how I started writing verse. After that, the next step was: wow, maybe I could write something that's all mine, that's not relying on any melody or something. Maybe I could invent a melody. I started writing songs. That was 1978. And I got really into that. And that was before I really understood what poetry was. I mean, we were doing poetry in school and I was familiar with Shakespeare and all that stuff, but I wasn't really interested in it at that point. I was more interested in music and song forms. I started getting really obsessed. I would get these, what we call copy books, which was an exercise book, and fill one out a month, 60–80 pages. So, I was writing all the time.

HT: And then when did you start performing?

AJ: That didn't come 'till long after. The real performance thing didn't start until I came to the UK. And even then, when I first came in 89, the performances that I started doing were with music. I started a rock band and I was obsessed with this idea of being a

songwriter and a singer, and I was performing my songs with the band. And then it was years after that, probably about 1994, when I first started reading poetry at poetry readings.

HT: In terms of artistic practice, are there any other art forms apart from music that you have experience with?

AJ: Painting. I paint very occasionally, but I really enjoy it. And I find it very spiritually rewarding... And also photography. I have always loved photography and taking photographs. Not to a professional standard, but getting into the aesthetics of it. It's interesting that all these art forms – photography and painting – are all about capturing a moment, which is what poetry is. The capturing of something.

HT: Which particular topics or issues have you been most interested in poetically?

AJ: The topic of being a Trinidadian. I came here in 1989 when I was probably about 21 or 22, so I'd lived a whole two decades in Trinidad. I found that the longer I stayed [in the UK], the more I wrote about Trinidad. So, one of the themes that that appears in my work a lot is family. The lineage, the family lineage, family history, connections within family. Not just my family, but family in general. The idea of family, the idea of ancestry, the idea of the natural world, landscapes, trees and animals, because that was definitely part of my upbringing, my childhood. I think one of the other themes is loss. Loss of Trinidad in a way, but also loss of people. Loss of mother and loss of father. Loss of people. So there's a lot of grief that is rearticulated over and over again. There are also other strands: the surreal, carnival, the carnivalesque. Surreal elements are there constantly.

HT: If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a bit more about the surreal. Why is that significant for you? Where did you first encounter it? Or was it always part of your childhood?

AJ: Oh, yes. It was always part of my childhood. Again, it's like these things exist before you find a name for them. Amiri Baraka says, 'To name something is to wait for it in a place you think it will pass'.[1]

Carnival is surreal. I grew up in a place where people would put on costumes, have stilts six-foot high and dress like bats. Going to the Baptist Church with my grandparents, people would speak in tongues, and they would tell amazing stories, they would go on amazing, sort of spiritual journeys. I grew up hearing about these

[1] Kalamu ya Salaam, Interview: Amiri Baraka Analyzes How He Writes. https://kalamu.com/neogriot/2014/01/10/interview-amiri-baraka-analyzes-how-he-writes [Last accessed 20 May 2025].

things, this this was part of my life. My grandmother, who I was very close to, would tell me amazing stories about trees that would talk, and how we can hear a tree talking and just weird stuff. That was my upbringing, that was my growth. So it was always there.

Much later on, when I was living here sometime in the early 2000s, I met a guy who was a writer as well, from Montreal, a Trinidadian-heritage writer called James Oscar. He introduced me to Aimé Césaire, André Breton and Ted Joans and a lot of other surrealist writers. And I realised, as I previously mentioned, to name something, I waited for in a place and it found me. And I was like, OK, so this is what I'm doing. I'm part of this. So that's when it became surrealism in the inverted commas. At that point in time, when I encountered it, I'd been writing for many years. I've always been a very inquisitive writer, always searching, searching. And often times, the more interesting work happens for me where you lose control of the work, where your pen is working quicker than your mind. So you write something that's just weird, strange. And I was really attracted to those moments, those places. And surrealism gave me the opportunity through different processes to extend those periods where there was a loss of control and you were working with the unconscious. So that's why I was really, really attracted [to it].

HT: That reminds me that at the 'All Borders Blur Conference' at QMUL [Queen Mary University of London], you mentioned 'speaking in tongues' and transcendence. Are you able to expand on these themes? Do they resonate with wider cultural issues?

AJ: At the spiritual Baptist Church, people would feel possession and they would speak and they would utter things. I don't know if that's surrealism, but they were definitely speaking from a different part of the brain. And I see that as a metaphor for transcending language. It's where conscious language fails. And I'm attracted to that. Madan Sarp says that conscious discourse, conscious speak, is what you hear on the surface, and sometimes the unconscious breaks through, and when it breaks through, it's in an incomprehensible form. And I was attracted to that because I was searching, I guess, for a truth. I kept searching in my work for real speech. The real utterance.

HT: Is that a way of possibly thinking about the relationship between music and poetry? You mentioned earlier in this interview that 'the score of the written poem becomes the music when played'.

AJ: Yes, they do work in tandem because as a poet you're concerned about euphony. You're concerned about the sound of the words, you're concerned about how the poem sounds. So it means that you have to read the poem, you have to utter it.

HT: How have the ‘greats’ influenced you? Or is it more about feeling that you’re part of a milieu?

AJ: I remember having this conversation with Kamau [Brathwaite]. When I asked him who influenced him, I expected him to say, ‘Well, I used to read Keats, or I used to read a lot of T.S. Eliot. He didn’t say any of that. He said to me, ‘When I was growing up, there was a guy in the corner who was carving a map of Africa and we’d have conversations’.

And I realised that your influences are at that level – when you’re a child, those people who really shaped your way of looking at the world. It’s not poets that you read when you’re in your 20s. So I have those early influences as well: my grandmother was a huge influence, my father going to the Baptist Church, the preachers; they probably had the most influence on the way I read work. The performance element is definitely informed by the preachers in the Baptist churches. But if we’re talking about poets as an influence, what I liked with Gil Scott Heron was the vulnerability in his voice. There’s a tone of vulnerability that’s there, which makes even the most strident poems feel human. But also people like the Mighty Sparrow, Lord Kitchener. They were huge influences. Especially Sparrow because of how he used humour and double entendre. That really had an impact.

HT: Would you say that your work could be called, or is related to, jazz poetry?

AJ: Very much. Primarily because the approach has been based on a lot of jazz philosophy, on collective improvisation. My performance is jazz-like because I’m responding to what the musicians are doing, which is what a jazz musician does. We respond to each other in a way that a classical musician might not. He would play what he’s supposed to play, which is a discipline, and which is great. But a jazz musician is listening to the other person playing and responding to that. So, I’m responding to the band in a live situation and responding to what’s going on around it.

HT: What can you do in performance that you can’t do in writing?

AJ: Be in the moment. You can do that. At a live performance, you are in the moment, you’re in yourself, you’re in the zone, you’re in this space in which things are happening in real time. And that’s a special thing. I always say that performing live, especially with the band, really forces you to be yourself because you can’t pretend. Even the fact that it’s a performance, you’re actually performing as yourself. You can’t ‘perform’ because people see through it and the performance becomes inauthentic and the audience, can see straight away that you’re faking. It’s not real. You’re pretending. But when you are in that zone performing, especially if you’re collaborating with musicians and stuff, you are forced to be in the real time in yourself, who you are, and that’s beautiful. I think it’s

the same with doing spoken word, with performing poetry. You're in that zone. It's just you and the words and you have to be real, you have to be true. So that's quite a beautiful thing. You don't get that with the page. With the page you can lie. You can deceive. You can choose the right words, but in a performance, you're kind of stuck with whatever you got. There you are. And the audience. There's a feeling of engagement.

HT: What would you offer as advice for emerging poets today?

AJ: Read, read, read – constantly read. Read one poet and read who influenced them. Read essays, read the people mentioned in these essays and follow the whole chain and develop a writing practice. Develop a practice where you write every day, without fail, for at least two years. And if you miss a day, punish yourself. Give yourself one less cup of coffee or something so that it gets to the point where you feel bad when you miss a day. Once you start feeling bad that you missed a day, you're on the right path. It's work. It's reading and writing. That's all you gotta do.

3) Marsha Prescod, Poetry Performance & Intersecting Practices

This is an edited extract of the interview between Marsha Prescod and Dr Helen Thomas that took place on 28 June 2024 at Harlesden Library, London, as part of the 'Poetry Off the Page' Project.

HT: Marsha, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed today. It's a real pleasure to have you here. I'm going to start by asking some questions about how you came to poetry and when and where you started to perform?

MP: I'm part of the Windrush generation of people who came here between the end of the 40s and up to the 60s. I came in 1953 when I was a toddler, three years old. I was among the first set of young black people to become teenagers here, at a time and in a location where things were very difficult for our community, including issues around housing, education, employment and how the police treated us. So, some of us teenagers became somewhat militant and political. I was on the fringe of various political groups, very enthusiastic, going to meetings, helping to produce leaflets, and going on marches. Many of us were students or adjacent to students. And after a while, I noticed that when we were talking about changing things and being a bit revolutionary, some people were busy, working and providing for their families and so on. So, I thought, how can we get the message across? I had been writing since I was about 11. Before that, I was a child musician. I wondered whether there was a way to get the political ideas across in an entertaining way that people could absorb. And that's how poetry started happening.

But it would not have happened but for Michael McMillan. Michael McMillan met me in the street and said, 'There's this Black Writers workshop in Brixton. You must come to it'. And that was the best thing that could have happened. I went to the Black Writers workshop and met a lot of young other Black people having all sorts of arguments about writing. And it was while attending that, that I started producing poetry. It was an amazing, thriving, creative atmosphere. The idea was to create these poems, make them entertaining. They would be political, and people would laugh and then go away and think.

HT: Could you say anything about how poetry has impacted your life?

MP: The only writing that really spoke to me at school was Shakespeare, Shelley's 'Ozymandias' and Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' – but it would not be true to say that the poetry I learned through school impacted me. However, the poetry and performances I stumbled across in the 80s told me poetry could be a vibrant, living thing. That it was not to do with, how can I put it, a refined education. I came across people like Mikey Smith at the International Black Book Fair and Linton Kwesi Johnson. The dub poetry of the 80s had an impact on me, and impacted my political understanding, my political practice, and my writing.

HT: In terms of artistic practices, what art forms have you worked in apart from writing and performance poetry?

MP: I started off as a musician. I was composing music in my head as a young child. I didn't know this wasn't normal. I didn't even have a piano. I desperately wanted to play the piano, but my parents were hard working migrants with not much money. At one point we were living in slum housing so bad that if I'm under stress now I still have nightmares about living there. I didn't get to have piano lessons until I went to grammar school at 11. My teacher was wonderful. Miss Wardell. She encouraged me and I started playing some of the creations in my head. And the next thing I knew, she'd entered me for a round of auditions and I ended up with a Royal College of Music Scholarship.

But how can I put it politely? It wasn't a place that was used to Black people so and in the three years I was there, I only saw two or three other Black people and they were caterers serving food. The other thing was they didn't realise I couldn't really read music. I would remember stuff that I was set as homework and learn to play anyhow. So it was a very isolating experience. In fact, within the first term, or certainly halfway through the first year, I'd stopped composing. I now realise I'd experienced racism but not in an overt manner. And you know, that shrivels my stuff.

In my home there was a lot of music. My mother had an amazing jazz collection. So, the first art form was music from about age 5 to 11, and the other art form was fiction writing from the age of 10–11. And I used to read voraciously. I still do. I read the way people chainsmoke. And I eventually became a lawyer.

HT: Are there topics or issues that you have focused on in your poetry performances?

MP: Politics – not political parties – but situations, circumstances. What are communities experiencing? How are they suffering, thriving, or not thriving? Identity issues, our slave history, colourism, and various things like that. I'd wrap up all of those in the big bundle of world politics. I wanted to get people to think about certain things... Until our situation is as we want it to be, there is need for change and therefore our politics. And underneath that, there'd always be themes about culture or playing with language, et cetera. In theory we speak English in the Caribbean, but in practice our English is different and full of very interesting sayings and proverbs, tones and accents. I enjoyed performance poetry because it incorporated so many of those things in a rich tapestry.

HT: Would you be able to say more about humour and satire in your work?

MP: When you're trying to reach out to people, especially people who don't think the same way you do, how do you make a link? You have to show your common humanity, or you have to grab their attention in some way. Humour is an amazing thing. It can bring people together. It can also be a tool. It can be very cutting. And also, Trinidadian culture is very into word play – humorous and sarcastic word play. So, for example, if you're standing in front of a television, instead of saying 'Could you move, please', a Trinidadian would say, 'What? Your father is a glass maker?' In other words, 'are you transparent?' And as a child in a migrant community, I was hearing all this interesting language, with all the islands' people visiting each other's homes. Humour can reach people in a better way than anger.

HT: Which poets do you admire as performers?

MP: I grieved when we lost Benjamin Zephaniah. He was someone who did not really change when he became famous. I first saw him perform a poem with a grim title, that he made into an example of humour. 'This policeman is kicking me to death'. It brought the house down in the early 80s and towards the end, he started singing it operatically and everybody collapsed. And I thought, wow, so he has performance. Nobody's better. Linton Kwesi Johnson was supercool with his little hat, and you know, his little beard. I was inspired again. These guys were welcome. I would also say that the Last Poets and

Gil Scott Heron were a big influence and, I have to say, Miss Lou Louise Bennett. We were putting on a special thing for Maya Angelou, and Miss Lou came along. Her work was very grounded in the peasant, rural working class, part of Jamaican culture. And yet people didn't understand that she was also highly educated and had worked for the BBC Home Service, years before. She was an amazing trailblazer. And Mikey Smith. He was killed probably a year after I saw him. Oh, and Mutabaruka. I didn't know who he was, but he came on the stage in short, stocky locks flailing, hands in chains, shouting 'Free up the land, white man'. Those people showed us how to take an audience by the throat and not let them go. You could hear a pin drop when they did this stuff.

HT: Are there any other performance traditions that you link your work with?

MP: Yes, Carnival. It was a big gathering for Black folks. Traditional food and we'd be on the street. In Trinidad, we'd have a lot of particularly individual mas [masquerade] players making fun of the local politicians. You'd know one had been caught up in sex scandals if someone came out with a giant bed on their head! And the Africa Centre in Covent Garden, has just come to mind: the Black Arts Movement and the Black Art Gallery. That's where I saw the work of artists like Keith Piper which inspired me.

HT: How would you describe a successful poetry performance?

MP: When you're performing, you can feel the audience. The first 15 seconds of terror, then you get into the flow, and you know, pretty soon, whether they're with you or not; you know whether you've got them or not. Success feels like a total communion. You have reached some of them. You know them. You've given, they've received. It's more than just the applause because you sense the audience's feelings.

HT: What advice would you like to have been given at the start of your career that would have been helpful for you and possibly for other poets now?

MP: To go international, to get on a train and go to other places, and make connections. To also do more work in schools to bring poetry to younger people. I would also advise staying connected with a good collective for as long as possible and doing as much as possible yourself to get your work, your stuff, out there.

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Competing Interests

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