

All Borders Blur

Mapping Intersections and Genre Crossings in UK Spoken-Word
Poetries Since 1965

11-12 November 2023
Queen Mary University of London

On 11 and 12 November 2023, almost exactly a year after the successful first project conference 'Taking the Mic', Poetry Off the Page (PoP) hosted its second conference. Titled 'All Borders Blur: Mapping Intersections and Genre Crossings in UK Spoken-Word Poetries Since 1965' (ABB), the two-day event brought together artists, academics, arts managers and poetry lovers from far and wide. Together, they explored the wealth and complexities of spoken word art forms in a vibrant mix of artistic, academic, and genre-blurring presentations, including two exciting and thought-provoking keynote lectures by award-winning poets **Dr. Anthony Joseph** and **Joelle Taylor**. Welcoming over 50 in-person attendees at Queen Mary University of London in the historic People's Palace Building and 20 online participants via Zoom, **All Borders Blur** saw many vital conversations about poetry in performance unfold.

Some inaugural remarks were spoken by Poetry Off the Page PI **Ass.-Prof. Julia Lajta-Novak**, who welcomed all guests and thanked the organising committee for their hard work and dedication. Particular thanks went to former PoP team member **Dr. Shalini Sengupta**, who co-organised this conference while moving to her new position as a lecturer of diasporic literatures at Newcastle University, and the generous hosts **Prof. Peter Howarth** and **Prof. Andrea Brady** of Queen Mary University of London, as well as to conference administrator **Marie Krebs**. PoP also had the great pleasure of introducing **Dr. Helen Thomas**, who joins the team in December 2023 and will be in charge of the open-access special issue which is set to arise from this conference's diverse mix of presentations. The microphone was then passed to conference co-convenor **Prof. Peter Howarth**, who cordially invited all attendees to the evening programme titled 'Poetry Party' at the Court (formerly the Roebuck). This historical venue has seen decades of spoken word shows: **Prof. Howarth** brought an old flyer from the poetry organisation **Apples & Snakes**, esteemed partners of Poetry Off the Page, which showed that spoken word virtuosos like Adrian Mitchell and Joolz gathered there as early as the 1990s (see *Image 1*). The Poetry Party also doubled as a poetic finissage for **Prof. Howarth's** project 'Festival as Form', whose final report can be found at <https://www.festivalasform.org/>.

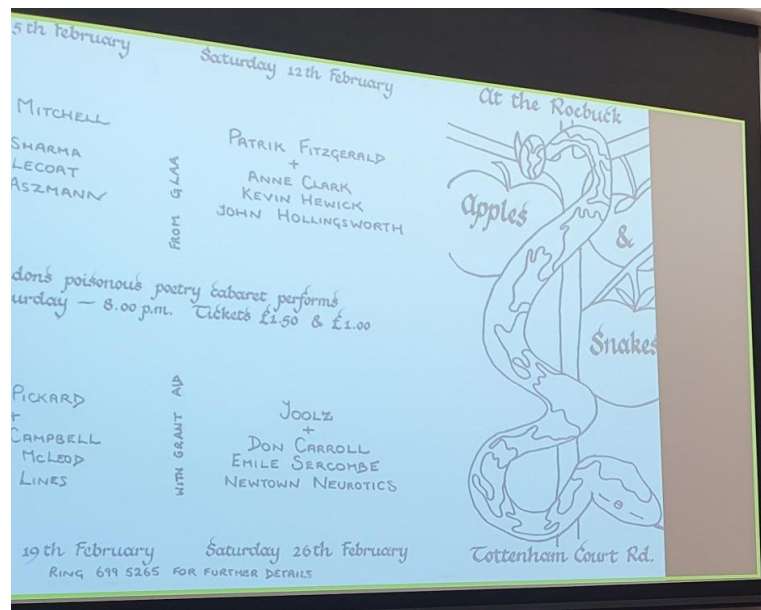


Image 1
Apples and Snakes Flyer

After the organisers whet attendees' appetites for two days full of poetry, performance, and all things spoken word, the conference launched into the first panel of the day, which was chaired by PoP's own senior researcher, **Prof. Martina Pfeiler**, on forms of 'poetry as/and protest'. **Hanan Issa** opened the panel with a crash course on Cynghanedd, an ancient Welsh verse form, and reflected on the politics of (mis)understanding on the basis of a 'nonsense poem'. After this, **Jay Mitra** made a passionate call for the decolonisation of punk poetry, critiquing the historically inaccurate and exclusionary image of punk as a 'white' genre, by reclaiming the term for the poets of colour Salena Godden and Danez Smith.

Panel 2, chaired by **Dr. Helen Thomas**, then continued in the vein of this rebellious spirit: It revolved around the symbiosis between poetry and social justice movements. **Covadonga Fernández García's** presentation explored the possibilities of using spoken word in didactic settings for the empowerment of neurodiverse students. Her presentation offered a vibrant overview of Debris Stevenson's artistic oeuvre, including film, music, and poetry, and their uses in fighting the dehumanisation of neurodiverse students. Next, curator and producer **Melanie Abrahams** shared some of her experiences as founder and Creative Director of **Renaissance One**. She reflected on the question of self-definition, as she situates herself as a practitioner with a focus on orality and oral modes of delivery, commenting on how fluid and flexible the spoken word truly is. Finally, **Bhumika Billa** shared her powerful interdisciplinary work, including a screening of the genre-bending film 'IN(VISIBLE)', which combines poetry, dance, and emancipatory activism.

During a brief lunch break, attendees and presenters could replenish their energy with sandwiches and animated conversations. Soon, the third panel commenced. Chaired by **Bhumika Billa**, this set of presentations explored the symbiotic relationships between poetry and dance. Audiences were treated to a double act by poet-academic **Liz Macwhirter** and dancer **Sander Vloebergs** (see *Image 2*), whose performance

'Blue: A Lament for the Sea' set a contemplative mood and made attendees yearn for stretches of open water. This mesmerizing piece provided a valuable glimpse into the myriad possibilities for innovative, genre-crossing poetics. The second panellist **Carol Leeming, MBE FRSA** then reflected on the role of 'choreopoetics' and magical realism in her poetic composition. She outlined multiple forms of performance – such as theatre, music, storytelling – that are integrated in her creative practice, and reflected on their emancipatory potential. **Abby Oliveira** gave insight into the genesis of her collaborative piece 'After the Rain', which she developed with the modern circus company Compagnie XY in Derry, and which related to the ongoing processes of peace-building in Northern Ireland. Her talk ended on a moving reflection on the embodied emotionality of being carried.



Image 2
Sander Vloeberghs in 'Blue: A Lament for the Sea'

The final panel of our first conference day, which was chaired by the Glaswegian poet-organiser **Ross McFarlane**, saw three amazing panels on music and poetry as inextricably entangled art forms. First, Leeds-based artist **Lence** gave a fascinating presentation-cum-demonstration of the rap/poetry collective 'Blur the Lines', the Super Bowl of performers, poets, and rappers all over the North of the UK. PoP's very own **Shefali Banerji** then traced the intermedial elements of Jasmine Gardosi's genre-bending show *Dancing to Music You Hate*, opening up new perspectives on spoken-word theatre and music. Shefali guided attendees through their analysis of the piece step-by-step, also treating them to a short extract from Gardosi's performance to illustrate their thesis. The final presentation of the day was by **Erin Gannon**, whose performance pointed to the proximity of rock n' roll and poetry, showing that poetry does not have to be quiet or subdued, but can be loud, vibrant, and angry.

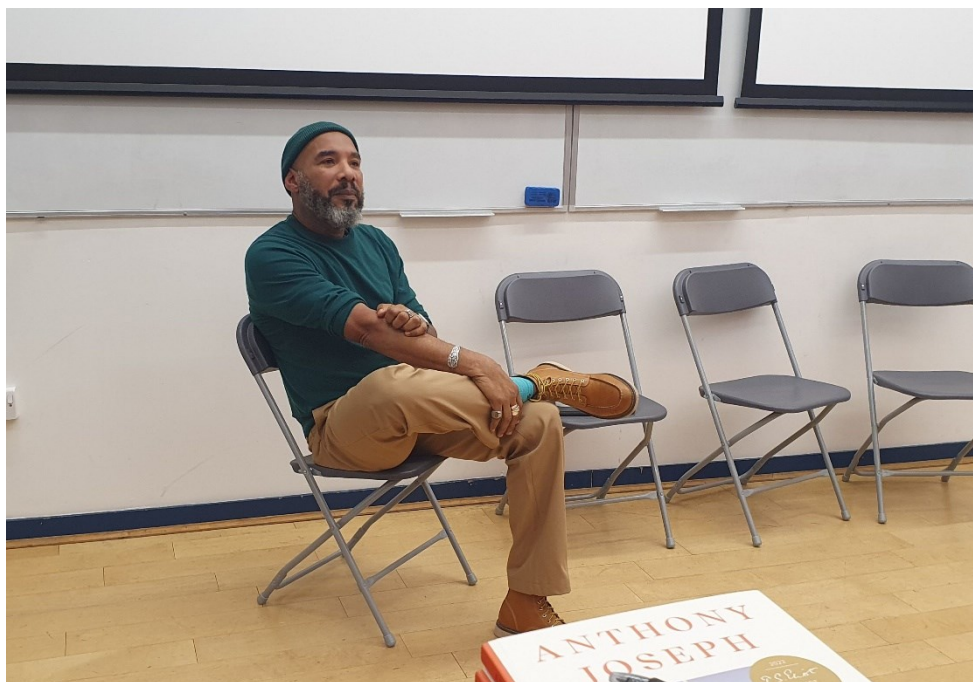


Image 3
Anthony Joseph

The first keynote lecture of the conference was held by none other than the **Dr. Anthony Joseph** (see *Image 3*), winner of the T. S. Eliot Prize 2023, whose presentation 'Finding the Frequency at the Centre' reflected on his being simultaneously in art and academia, and on the manifold influences on his artistic development. Joseph's observation that "poetry happens at the point of magic" resonated noticeably with the audience, many of whom will have remembered at this point precisely what sparked their love for poetry.

On the evening of 11 November, co-convenor **Prof. Peter Howarth** threw a roaring Poetry Party, launching the report for his research project **Festival as Form**. Amid a relaxed atmosphere and delicious pub food, attendees, organisers, and anyone lucky enough to stumble into the first floor of The Court that night were treated to an evening of fantastic performances by poet-performers **Carol Leeming MBE** (see *Image 4*), **Dr. Hannah Silva**, and QMUL's very own poet-academic **RED MEDUSA**. The three performances were connected by an underlying theme of agency, sexuality, and emancipation, among many other topics. It was a beautiful way to end an exciting day of connections forged, conversations enjoyed, and laughs shared.



Image 4
Carol Leeming MBE

Attendees and panellists congregated once again on Sunday morning for the fifth conference panel, which dealt with poetry in the digital age. **Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani** and **Atau Tanaka** shared their interdisciplinary artwork ‘heart monologues’, which uses the musician Tanaka’s experimental sounds to weave together a corporeal experience of heartbeats and synesthetic soundscapes. **Hannah Silva** reflected on their collaborative work with AI programmes in the creation of ‘My Child, the Algorithm’, and PoP’s PhD researcher **Claire Palzer** moved the focus to Ireland through her analysis of virtual modes of performance in Mel Bradley’s *Ms Noir’s Seven Deadly Sins*.

This was followed by the final panel of the conference, chaired by Claire Palzer, which saw **Rupert Smith**’s performance from his experimental poetic novel *Tract* and **Ross McFarlane**’s reflections on audio drama produced by the theatre company **In the Works**, of which he is a founding member. The second keynote was appropriately prefaced with **Camelia Chouhouri**’s presentation on **Joelle Taylor**’s gender-and-genre-bending poetry, which then seamlessly blended into **Joelle Taylor**’s own creative keynote lecture titled ‘Transgenre’ (see *Image 5*). Filling the room with her larger-than-life presence, Taylor’s performance from her award-winning collection *C+nto* was certainly a highlight of All Borders Blur, moving some of the audience to tears.



Image 5
Joelle Taylor

The conference was finally closed by **Dr. Shalini Sengupta**, who once again thanked her co-convenors **Prof. Andrea Brady** and **Prof. Peter Howarth**, the keynote speakers, all performers and panellists, the **Poetry Off the Page** team, conference assistant **Thomas Buckingham** and the student ushers for their valuable support and for making this conference possible.

Dr. Helen Thomas, the new senior researcher at Poetry Off the Page, is looking forward to editing the special issue arising out of this event. We hope that this conference has contributed to highlighting the vibrancy and relevance of spoken word poetry as a diverse and rapidly evolving art form, as well as the critical discourse around it. Many conversations have been started throughout these two days, and we cannot wait to see what comes next!