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[Episode 60 - Kayo Chingonyi \(February 2016\)](#)

Host: David Turner - **DT**

Guest: Kayo Chingonyi - **KC**

Transcript edited by: Harriet Foyster – 07/07/2017

Conversation:

DT: Hello. My name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short. Today I am in central London with Kayo Chingonyi. Hello Kayo, how you doing?

KC: How you doing David?

DT: Kayo's currently the associate poet at the [Institute of Contemporary Arts](#) in central London. But we'll talk about that in a minute and we'll begin with a poem.

KC: Sure. This is a poem called Martin's Corner.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:01:20]

DT: Thank you Kayo, cheers. How you doing?

KC: Yeah I'm good thank you.

DT: So like I said you're currently the associate poet at the ICA. How did that come about?

KC: The ICA approached me about a year ago, I suppose. The curator, [Juliette Desorgues](#), she emailed me and said "we're looking to appoint an associate poet or associate poets, would this be something you're interested in?" And so I said yes because I'd been to some stuff at the ICA before, I know a little bit about their history in working with poets, and so I sent them some stuff by way of application and I think a number of other people did, and each of us met with them and in the end they appointed myself and they appointed [Sophie Collins](#) as associate poets for five months each.

So each of us had some things that we wanted to focus on in that time. And yeah it just came about through ICA emailing me and my meeting with them and I guess them weighing up who they wanted for the role and then deciding on that basis. Yeah I think the things that I pitched to them that I wanted to do are pretty similar to the things I've ended up doing. I think maybe I might have been too ambitious with it initially but that's not always a bad thing. But yeah I'm really, really pleased to be doing it and that it all worked out.

DT: And what do you personally hope to achieve from this residency? And also as a sub-part of that question, how possible is it to achieve those things as well? Because I don't really know how this kind of residency would work.

KC: I think with a residency like this it's quite open. Mostly my role is to add something to the events programme at the ICA. So I'm doing two events, one that you've been to already, [Poetry and Sound](#), and then [The Poetics of Grime](#). But I'm also doing a workshop with young people around initiations which I'm thinking a lot about lately. But I guess contributing to the programme is one thing, but then there's also a possibility for writing new work in response to some of the collections and the archive that they have at the ICA which is really massive. It has a lot of stuff in it around poetry, youth culture, arts, activism, loads of stuff in there.

So there's this scope to go into the archive and let that influence me a little bit. And I'm hoping to do some of that and make something, a publication maybe, that draws together some of the work from people that have performed at my events, some new work from the

archive and from the collections, and just maybe some commentary or some ideas that I've gained from doing the residency. So what I'm mostly hoping to achieve is just to broaden the programme at the ICA in some ways, bring in people that have never been to the ICA before or have thought about going but have never gone down there, bring out some of their engagement with poetry in the past really.

DT: Yeah because they've got quite a broad history haven't they?

KC: Yeah.

DT: If you talk about broadly... The spoken word events as well.

KC: Yeah. I mean they've been doing speaking events for a long time but also they've been directly involved with poets. They were involved with poets and critics like [Eric Mottram](#). He's been very involved in the kind of British avant garde poetic circles. Same with [Bob Cobbing](#), he is quite famous in sound poetry circles. And also they've been involved with stuff to do with the kind of materiality of the book and publishing in print and all that kind of stuff which I think is more important than ever to think about. I think print is not really an ancient technology, it's relatively new in some senses. But it's already being seen as something really outmoded and it's being... It's going to be replaced in a few years time.

And I think there are still some benefits of print, there are still some things that print publication affords text that we should think about and address. I think something like this residency is a good space to think about those things in relation to poetry. As to how possible it is to achieve all of that stuff I think... I think contributing to the programme is easy enough because I'm bringing something to the programme that maybe they don't have in quite the same way because of my own particular tastes which are, I guess, mixed up in lots of different ways and so that might bring some interesting events to the table. And then thinking about the broader question of maybe print and publication I think that's something that we can only start a conversation about. Yeah. And I think I'm confident we can do that in this time that we have.

DT: And what kind of place do you feel that poetry has in contemporary art spaces?

KC: I was really surprised to find a place for poetry in contemporary art spaces. I did an event at the [Serpentine Gallery](#), they have a poetry marathon every year and they have various poetry events throughout the year. And I just didn't realize the extent to which they engaged with poetry but also the audiences they attract for that, the people who were there weren't necessarily people that I seen around the London poetry scene. But they were engaged with poetry in a very... In a very kind of nuanced way I suppose. They were willing to sit and listen to the stuff for an hour, more than an hour, and then talk about it afterwards and this kind of stuff.

So I think contemporary art has a space for poetry in it, and I think a lot of contemporary artists use poetry and text in their work quite often so it's not really that much of a leap for people to go along to a poetry reading if it's framed in the right way for them, I suppose, if it's made open to them. So I think there's definitely a space for poetry in contemporary art

because poetry is thinking about the texture that words have, as you might think about the texture of colours or... You can even think about, once you get into sound, you can think about the colour that words have as well.

So yeah I think there's definitely a space for it and being at the ICA has shown me that more and more because I was really amazed by the response that the event that we did got really. It was essentially an experimental poetry night and there was loads of people there and they were up for it and loads of them stayed afterwards in the bar and had discussions and this kind of stuff. So yes, it seems like a really good moment to be involving myself in contemporary art circles.

DT: I mean one thing I've always found is I think when poetry events do happen in art spaces like that it tends to be easier to start up a discussion afterwards, doesn't it?

KC: Yeah.

DT: Because it sort of more... Just happens far more in art spaces, the discussion of what work means. And also the language for discussing painting, like you said, and poetry, they're not that far removed anyway are they?

KC: I think there's a certain quality of attention that a gallery space brings which invites people who are willing to think about things in a more extended way, or willing to have a deeper conversation about things. If you have a poetry event above a pub, already the context is a more social context. Whereas in a gallery there's already a kind of layer of analytical thinking that goes into how the space looks and how the program is presented.

So if you put a poetry reading or event in there I think it brings a different quality of attention to things. And so when you come to discuss things afterwards there's going to be that level of attention there as well. That's not to say you can't get into a discussion after a poetry event at a pub or whatever, but I think the quality of the discussion is different. Not that it's better, but it's just different.

DT: And I think it's also important to point out, I think we both agree, that it's nice to have those events in pubs and not have the pressure to... You know sometimes it's nice to, good to, have both. You need to have spaces where you can maybe discuss ideas if you want to, and also have nights where you can just go watch, enjoy, and have a drink or dance afterwards.

KC: Have a bit of a chat, yeah.

DT: We'll talk a bit more about the ICA programming in a bit but we'll take another reading first.

KC: Sure. This is a poem called The Colour of James Brown's Scream. This is the title poem of a new pamphlet or chapbook that has just been released.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:12:00]

DT: Thanks for that, cheers. So as you mentioned before you started the series of programmes at the ICA with the Poetry and Sound event. Maybe you could explain briefly the structure of the event and the night and then we can chat a bit more about how it came about.

KC: Yeah sure. The Poetry and Sound event was presented in the theatre at the ICA which is a very big, blacked out space. It has a kind of lighting rig above it. And we decided to position each of the four poets performing on a different platform, spread around the room in a kind of 360 configuration. So I started the night by introducing the first two poets and then just opened it out to them, then partway through I introduced the next two poets. And I think having that 360 formation meant that the audience had to kind of keep moving, and it kept it flowing and moving in a way that if you just had a sit down, hour-long reading it wouldn't maybe speak to the kind of acoustical, spatial kind of awareness that I was thinking about in relation to sound poetics and just thinking about sound in general.

I decided to put on an event under the title Poetry and Sound just because I've been fascinated for a long time by what constitutes sound poetry. If poetry is already using language musically, or thinking about the sound of words, what happens when somebody goes deeper into that process and goes just into the sound of a word, and leaves its meaning behind for a moment? Or goes so deep into the sound of a word that its meaning is lost momentarily? So I was really interested in those poets that are really having dynamic engagement with sound, that are musicians as well as poets, that are influenced by music, that are creating performances which have the musicality of words at their heart.

I think in poetry, with any writing which is then read out, the easy thing would be to read something which is easily understandable, referential, which somebody can listen to you read and get an understanding from immediately. With sound poetry you get a totally different thing whereby you almost reach someone's subconscious, it feels like. You might stir some memory that they have that is grouped around a particular sound, or you might remind them of a particular thing, or it might have a very strong meaning for one person which is different for another person, which I think, if you only work at the level of narrative and referential meaning, you might lose that process a little bit.

So I was really fascinated by how I could bring that thinking around poetry into the events programme that I proposed to the ICA. And I mentioned this event Poetry and Sound to them and they were really excited because obviously they've got that history with loads of sound poets and I think that works really well in a gallery space as well because it takes you into the realms of performance art and this kind of stuff. So it was just a natural fit, it seemed like, once we had the details sketched out. I think it went really well and I think I might continue to do some events under the kind of heading of Poetry and Sound and see where I can take that next door or which avenues I can explore with it.

DT: It's probably worth mentioning the four poets that you invited to the event as well in case people want to check them out because they were all really... It was a great night. I

hadn't seen any of them before and it was really nice. I knew all of their names but I just hadn't seen them at any events.

KC: Yeah so the final line up was [David J](#), [Amy Evans](#), [Holly Pester](#) and [Anthony Joseph](#), and I was just really pleased with the range that we could encompass. David J and Anthony Joseph are both kind of musicians, or they're influenced by musical lineages in hip hop, in calypso, in jazz, in funk. And Holly Pester and Amy Evans are coming at it from a kind of British avant garde poetry perspective. But they have a little bit of musical... A musical attunement, an interest as well. I think Amy is a singer too, she's a choral singer. So it was just a really nice gathering of different voices I think that complimented each other really well. I was really pleased with the range that we were able to show.

DT: And talking about sound in this way, loaded with that kind of meaning, what role does it play in your own writing?

KC: I think sound is one of the main things that I draw on in the kind of writing that I do. I think when I'm feeling lost in a piece of writing and unable to find the kind of thread that's going to guide me through writing it, sometimes sound is the thing that pushes a piece of writing through. And what I mean by that is just that there might be something missing. And it might be that a song lyric or something that I listen to reminds me of something which fits into that space.

Or it might be that I stop thinking about trying to be referential and go for a more emotive, evocative thing. So I might invoke a sound in that moment and then see what that does. So yes sound is really important, in particular music I think is something that always comes back, either quoting lyrics or being inspired by a piece of instrumental music or being reminded of something by a piece of music. I also write songs occasionally so I'm always trying to be musical in the writing that I do. So sound is always, always something I'm thinking about.

DT: And are you always striving for musicality in print as well? That seems to be equally important to you as well.

KC: Yeah I think so. I haven't taken this as far as certain poets like say [Douglas Kearney](#), he's really amazing in what he does in terms of trying to get a musical feel in the way the words are placed on the page. But I'm always trying to get those echoes and repetitions and things that when you look at them you'll get a kind of musical effect from the looking as well as the speaking aloud and listening. So yeah it's always... I never feel a poem is finished in print unless it evokes something of that sonic engagement.

DT: Talking about influences and musical influences, so your next event at the ICA will be Poetics of Grime. Why have you chosen that as an event?

KC: So I chose the Poetics of Grime because I've been, and I think poetry in general has been, very influenced by hip hop lyricism. Since the inception of hip hop that has become a popular form of poetry in some sense, for want of a better word. And I think Grime is doing a similar thing but it's a very UK specific music. So I was interested in exploring UK specific

influence, because grime has that intermingling of UK garage and it has a little bit of hip hop lyricism, has a little bit of kind of jungle and ragga lyricism. So I was thinking of a way in which all of us over here have maybe been influenced by that tradition, and I thought grime was the perfect music to encapsulate that because if we're going to talk about the influences that we have we can talk about hip hop and hip hop has been very influential in various poets.

But if we talk about grime then we're creating a fuller picture of the musical landscape in this country. So that was the main reason. But also I've been listening to garage and I've been listening to grime since you know... I started listening to garage in the late 90s, 98. I've been listening to garage since then, really. And so the movement into grime is something that I've witnessed through first hand experience of being there when like my friends were in cyphers like battling each other, or being there when people were recording sets onto cassette like in somebody's garage because they had decks and all this kind of stuff. So it's very much a part of what I grew up in. And for a time I was trying to be like a garage MC towards the tail end of UKG in terms of its popular appeal.

So around 2000/2001 I was writing garage lyrics and performing those. And then when it shifted into grime I was kind of more focussed on poetry but I was still following the MCs and their lyrics and I knew their buzz and this kind of stuff. So it's always been a music that's been close to me. And in terms of the people that I know it's always been very close at hand, in terms of people making beats, there've been people deejaying, there's different MCs. So I think when I start to think about what music has really framed me, it has to be grime.

Hip hop has been really important but the one that has made me feel really like involved and that made me feel that sense of ownership is really grime, because it speaks about catching a train to different ends to do a radio set and you know like in my mid to late teens I was catching trains to go and do open mics and stuff like that in the poetry sense. So yeah it spoke about something that I could see when I looked outside in a way that hip hop from like... I was really big into [Mob Deep](#), when I was listening to that stuff I got something from it, but I didn't necessarily understand from a first hand experience of those things.

DT: Actually I think it's probably, in terms of recurring influences, it's probably... It seems to be that the most common influence in young British poets is grime. And I think it is probably important that there is some discussion about how that is not hip hop and you know why it's so influential to young British kids.

KC: Yeah. I think if you're like under 21 that will be your main musical heritage as a poet, probably. You might be a little bit influenced by... Like on the other side of things you might be into like punk rock and indie and new wave and that kind of stuff. But there's always a way in which grime has sort of served as an umbrella at a certain time for a kind of British identity. I think when Dizzee Rascal broke through he was representing for a lot of people in a way that American listeners had never heard before, essentially. When he got his Mercury Prize and said "East London stand up tall" in his really like... He was really shy at that point, it seemed like there was this defiance and shyness at the same time. And I think grime has

allowed us to move away from the shyness into a kind of sense of ourselves. So yeah whenever you have a music like that it's bound to galvanise people.

DT: We're going to take a third and final reading then we'll get onto chatting a bit about other things you're up to at the moment.

KC: Sure. I wanted to read this poem because it has a little bit of garage in it, and we've spoken a little bit about garage. So it starts with a quotation from [Darryl McDaniels](#) from [Run DMC](#) from a documentary called The Hip Hop Wars, I believe, which was broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK. It was all about tapes back then. Darryl McDaniels. So this is a poem called Self-Portrait as a Garage MC, and this is from the second section.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:27:55]

DT: Thank you very much. Yeah. So what else are you up to at the moment? I believe you're involved with another residency?

KC: Yeah, it's kind of been the year of residencies in a strange way. So I've been working with Royal Holloway, University of London and [Counterpoints Arts](#). Counterpoints Arts are an arts organization who work with migrant and refugee artists, not only to commission work but also to shine a light on the work that people are doing. They're involved in [Celebrating Sanctuary](#), they put that together, and they also put together the [Refugee Week](#) Conference, and also [Platforma](#), which is a kind of conference where different migrant and refugee arts organizations get together. So what they're really involved in is celebrating artists who break out of the kind of easy tropes around refugees and migrants.

People who do a range of different work. People who speak back to where they came from but also who have created hybrids which come through their heritage and history but also the present, the art world that they're part of now having moved. So with Royal Holloway and Counterpoints Arts I've been working on new writing. I've been working with the students at Royal Holloway. We'll be doing a number of public events. One of them is in April, I believe the 24th or so. It's at [Rich Mix](#). It's an event called [Literature and Activism](#). And there's going to be something as part of Refugee Week as well which is going to be a new piece of writing that I'll have been working on during the residency and Refugee Week this year is in the last week, I believe, of June.

So I've been really fortunate I think to have these different opportunities to work towards my interests, and migration is something that's very key to my poetics because without migration I wouldn't be writing poetry probably. Coming to live in this country was something that opened out the world of being a writer to me. So yeah, I'm very grateful for that opportunity to do it. I'm also a DJ. I played at the [Theatre Royal](#) in Stratford so my next DJ gig there is March 11th I think, so there's always a few things going on. There's a reading on the 26th of February at the British Library, that's to do with an anthology which was about mapping different spaces in Britain, and the anthology is called [Out of Bounds](#). So yeah there's loads of things going on.

DT: And do you have any blogs or...? So people can follow your work.

KC: Yes. My blog is called the Trainset Lifestyle. Which I've never really explained on the blog but it's kind of around how most poets get around. Because there's this running joke that poets don't drive, I don't know why, but you'd be surprised how many don't. So yeah the Trainset Lifestyle is my blog, that's <http://kchingonyi.wordpress.com>. But trainset lifestyle will get you there, or searching my name will get you there as well. Yeah.

DT: I'll put a link to the blog in the description of the video so people can just click on it and be redirected there.

KC: Thank you.

DT: We probably have to wrap up. We could just go on chatting all afternoon. Thank you very much Kayo.

KC: Cheers, nice one.

DT: I'd really recommend, if anyone's listening to this and has a chance to come down to the Poetics of Grime event at the ICA you should do that. If not just check out Kayo's blog. Thank you Kayo.

KC: Nice one, thanks.

DT: See you later.

End of transcript.