



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

Please note, [Lunar Poetry Podcasts](#) is produced as 'audio content' and is intended to be heard and not read. These transcriptions are to be used as an aid alongside the audio recordings. If it is possible I recommend you listen to the audio which includes emotion and emphasis, not included in this text. This transcript is produced by a human and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

If you would like to see any changes to the way this transcript is formatted, then please contact us on [Twitter](#) or on [Facebook](#). Alternatively, please take the time to complete this short online [survey](#).

The rights to any and all poems printed in this transcript are retained by the author, **do not** reprint or copy without the permission of the author. – David Turner, Lunar Poetry Podcasts.

©2018 Lunar Poetry Podcasts

---

[Episode 112: Mary Jean Chan; Sandeep K Parmar](#) – 23/04/2018

Transcript by Christabel Smith

### **Introduction:**

Host: David Turner – DT

**DT:** Hello, welcome to episode 112 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. Today's episode is in two parts, coming up in the second part is a short conversation with Sandeep K Parmar, recorded live at Verve Poetry Festival in Birmingham back in February.

First up though it's me chatting to the absolutely wonderful Mary-Jean Chan. We met up mainly to chat about her debut pamphlet, *A Hurry of English*, which is out through the brand-spanking-new Ignition Press. We wind our way through the motivations of people asking her why she writes in English, finding queer and gender-bending identities in the writing of Shakespeare and how it feels to be demanding space as a published queer writer. We also touch on how and why as writers we write about home, either concretely or as a concept, and how other writers give us permission to write about certain subjects.

For more information about the series or to get in touch find us at @Silent\_Tongue on Twitter and Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and Instagram, as well as over at [lunarpoetrypodcasts.com](http://lunarpoetrypodcasts.com), where you can also find a transcript of this conversation.

That transcript and indeed the entirety of this episode was made possible with the aid of a generous grant from Arts Council England, specifically the South West office.

If you like what Lunar Poetry Podcasts does in this episode or in general, please do shout about it to your friends and colleagues, either to their soft, meaty faces or through the cold, hard screens of their earth-poisoning devices. It really helps the series find new listeners. When I'm looking at the SoundCloud statistics page again at 3am, if the listening figures are rising, I perhaps won't feel like I'm wasting my life. Not completely, anyway.

Here's Mary-Jean.

### **Part one:**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Mary Jean Chan – **MJC**

**MJC:** My name is Mary Jean Chan, I'm a poet and editor from Hong Kong. I have a pamphlet out right now with Ignition Press, with Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre and also, my first collection will be coming out with Faber next year:

#### Rules for a Chinese Child Buying Stationery in a London Bookshop

Speak to the white  
elderly man at the counter.  
There will be many

more of them  
in your life, but start  
with him. Recall those syllables

you've whispered over and  
over like some version  
of the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father who art  
in heaven and is  
white and beyond skin.*

Enunciate. He must hear  
what you have to say  
if you are to be helped.

Begin with *please*. Say  
*may I*. End with *thank you*.  
He will be delighted

to know you are polite,  
soft-spoken, well-mannered.  
You will be overjoyed

©Mary Jean Chan, *a hurry of english*, Ignition Press 2018

**DT:** Thank you, Mary Jean, thank you for joining me/us.

**MJC:** Thank you for having me.

**DT:** I'm going to have to warn the listeners we know each other a little bit now and I may seem too relaxed to be professional, but I've been really looking forward to chatting to you in some capacity, in the podcast anyway. We've been chatting about you being part of it for a little while now, but it's been really nice we can line it up with the release of your debut pamphlet and all the other excitements we'll come on to chat about afterwards.

I have managed to make some notes for a change, which I'm really terrible about, especially if I feel I know someone, but I'm really glad you chose that poem to begin with, because I'd made a note about it. The line 'Enunciate, he must hear what you have to say if you are to be helped', let's begin there, because it really stood out in a poem which is quite pointed all the way through, but for some reason, that line jumped out at me.

**MJC:** Interesting. I think this has to do obviously with a reflection on me being an ESL speaker. I mean, I was born and raised in Hong Kong, but my mother doesn't speak English. My father does and at home, we would only speak in Cantonese. Sometimes, I would play with my other dialects, so I would speak in Mandarin Chinese or Shanghai Chinese, Shanghainese, to my mother. So English was always the language I was kind of learning at school, it was the language I had to perfect, especially because I went to an Anglican all-girls school, so prior to the handover of Hong Kong back to China in 1997.

I was one of those, I suppose, pre- and post-Colonial babies, because I had seven years of my schooling where I wasn't in a school that basically valued Chinese as much as English. It was all very implicit, but there was a sense that English was the better language. You had to make sure your English was good and then Chinese, as long as you spoke it well.

So yeah, I think there was always that thing at the back of my head and this is a poem supposedly in the voice of the speaker talking to a child and teaching her how to behave in a London bookshop. This is all imaginary, but obviously, lived experiences come into that. Of this perceived white gaze and how the female Chinese body, or child, is supposed to behave.

**DT:** So English was very much an aspirational language, something to reach for?

**MJC:** Right.

**DT:** Also what stood out to me in that line is the sense of what you need to do in order to show you want to be helped, as if that is implicit in the transaction. You're there to be aided in some way.

**MJC:** Yeah, I suppose, because the line prior to that is 'Our Father, who are in heaven, and is white and beyond skin', I find that quite interesting because now, reflecting on the person that Jesus was, he probably had darker skin. I definitely had this very pristine image of Jesus as a white man, growing up, and our school was Anglican Christian, so there was always that sense of English fuses in with the image of the white God and that is the aspirational thing, that you want to one day be able to speak on equal terms with an older white man, for example, that is the ultimate goal.

Obviously, I realise that's laden with colonial biases and all of that, but that's how we were raised in the school at least. Things have changed now, but that was how I grew up.

**DT:** Maybe that's why that poem stuck out, because it plays into feelings of aspiring to speak English, but also aspiring to feel part of that culture where that language has come from and be part of the shopkeeper culture, which couldn't really be much more middle-class English, especially around bookshops.

**MJC:** You also get this cultural image of the benevolent white old man, maybe he runs a candy shop. Because I grew up in Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl, you get all these images that are somehow part of my repertoire of children's books, so maybe that seeped into the poem.

**DT:** I was initially going to start the conversation off around the line in How It Must Be Said, 'what does this say about me, this obsession written in the language I never chose?' which seems like a starting point, not for the whole pamphlet, but important parts of it. We just started talking about English as a second language there.

**MJC:** I think it's interesting because putting this together, I was working with Alan, but the title came quite quickly. My draft title was A Hurry of English and initially, when Alan, Alan Buckley, my editor, hadn't seen all the poems, he was like 'that can be the temporary title

and we'll see if it works', but it sort of stuck. The line itself is a bit odd because A Hurry Of English, what does that even mean? It's sort of syntactically a bit odd.

It came to me, that line 'My desires dress themselves in a hurry of English to avoid my mother's gaze' and I suppose that does reflect years and years of reading things I thought were transgressive, you know, queer literature or even just Shakespeare, but knowing that there were undertones of homoeroticism, the gender bending, really enjoying that, but also I was doing the right thing, because I was studying for my English Literature class, but there was a sense of that being transgressive.

Because it was in a language my mother couldn't read, I felt very safe, I felt like I wasn't betraying anything. This was me perfecting my English, but at the same time, I didn't have to betray my own identity as a docile Chinese girl. Obviously, these are all stereotypes, but there was that sense growing up that I could keep these two worlds apart and neither would affect the other.

**DT:** It's interesting. Obviously, I don't have the experience of having English as a second language in that way, but the pamphlet, even just talking for a couple of minutes about it, the structure of it makes a lot more sense. It comes up in a lot of guests' writing and the way they talk about it, having that protective place within their own writing or within literature in general, with stuff they've found they love, especially queer writers, as well as finding someone else talking about what the queer self is through their writing. You found it in something that was also seen as aspirational in Hong Kong, being part of the great English canon of Shakespeare.

**MJC:** Yes and oddly, I think that gave me courage because I wasn't out and out doing something that was wrong or perceived to be wrong. It was like I was doing my homework, I was reading the English books and actually, at some point in my teenage years, I started, the ratio of my Chinese to English books started widening, the gap started widening, so for every five English books I read, I read one Chinese book. In the past, it used to be more even. I think maybe there was a sense at some point I couldn't reconcile the two worlds or it would be difficult to do so.

I'm sure there's a lot of Chinese queer literature out there, but at the time, I didn't feel safe enough to explore that, so English became almost the language that was that 'love that dare not speak its name'. That's from a poem by Lord Alfred Douglas and because I found these traces, I was like this is going to be my queer voice, a repository for my queer desires.

**DT:** Following on from that initial exploration into other queer identities you found through literature, I've notice a lot of people often say about other writers, when you first start writing to a point where you're first becoming published, there's a chance to reinvent yourself as an artist or writer. I wonder if that's missing the point as it doesn't acknowledge the number of writers that find their first opportunity to truly identify themselves and it's not a reinvention, it's simply an expression of who they've always felt they've been.

**MJC:** Yeah, I think so. Maybe there is that gap between the reader and the writer because a lot of people I know have written in their teenage years, They wrote in their diary or they

wrote poems. It would be hard to find someone who's never tried writing something, but then to make that your identity and also, I was saying just now, off the record, this is actually quite an exposing experience, even though all these poems have been published, most of them, in different journals and magazines, somehow that always felt safer because they were these odd bits and bobs tucked away in a larger entity and people might come across it if they read the whole thing, but then also they might not read it or they would skip.

But there's this whole unified, seemingly unified thing, which is a pamphlet that for the first time puts all of these different poems together and that for me feels like wow, someone can actually, if they care to read it, they would find a lot about myself but also, I suppose, my imagined selves in all of that.

**DT:** How do you reconcile the aspect of how demanding your work becomes once it's a single-author pamphlet or book? Because you're not flanked by other writers or sharing a space. Because now as a queer writer you are demanding space in a way that you may not have imagined previously.

**MJC:** It is a very vulnerable experience and I think I was quite surprised at feeling this way because the aspiration was always working towards a pamphlet and then eventually, a full collection. I didn't think I'd be so lucky that things would come together so quickly because Ignition Press was dreamt up by Niall Munro at Oxford Brookes and they made the press happen very quickly, really over the span of six, seven months and we were invited to submit and all of that.

Yeah, to answer your question, I suppose, it just feels like suddenly there is no place to hide. People will be reading the pamphlet and knowing that this is your work and so it's not like you're in the Poetry Review and somehow other people's writing also gives yours legitimacy, in a way, or the editorial and the way it's framed will give you a sense of 'I'm amongst other writers'.

I think the thing is my mother has increasingly been able to translate some of my poems. I don't know quite how she's doing it. Either my father is translating it for her or someone else and she picks up these bits and bobs. It's interesting because I think now she's recognising my identity, a large part of it is my writing and she's increasingly wanting to be in dialogue with me about why I wrote that, or what have I actually written, whereas in the past when it was a poem here or there that I would submit, that would be a very private thing almost. Even if it was published, my mum wouldn't know about it and it wouldn't be an event.

**DT:** And the act of being published drags you into the public view as well. There are so many pictures of you and you're doing public readings, which hopefully I will have mentioned in the introduction. Suddenly, you're centre-stage and it doesn't naturally sit in my mind as an accompanying part of what it means to sit down and write a collection as seemingly honest as yours.

I don't like to use the word honest with poetry, because it's irrelevant, but as something that's trying to confront a lot of difficult issues around identity and self-identity and how that might

affect your home life as a child. That doesn't seem to fit naturally with then going and talking about it on podcasts or stages in front of strangers.

**MJC:** It is an odd thing. There's a part of me that thinks I really value these opportunities, you know, being interviewed or being invited to speak, because then you get to communicate your ideas in a different forum for people who might not take the time to read the whole thing, you actually get to share a few poems on stage and they actually get to listen to it. It's a different experience listening to something than reading it.

There's also the strong urge to hide, to say no, I can't do this, not particularly because I'm afraid of public speaking, I'm sort of an ambivert so I'm OK with speaking in front of crowds, it's more the sense of, especially the Q&As when people ask you questions, you feel very exposed. Or sometimes the questions are so loaded, you don't know where to begin.

One thing that came up quite a lot and still does, is 'Why don't you write in Chinese?' or 'Will you write in Chinese?' It's not just a sense of local audiences expecting me as a Chinese person to write in Chinese but, my parents, my mother, would say you're bi-lingual and I can write in Chinese, so why English? Why not start writing in your own mother tongue? That becomes very fraught for me, precisely for the reasons I've talked about.

I'm asked to choose or I'm asked why my allegiance is not the way people perceive it should be, for example.

**DT:** This actually came up in conversation with Zeina Hashem-Beck. She gets this question constantly about why...

**MJC:** I love her work, by the way.

**DT:** It's fantastic...but why write in English when you grew up speaking Arabic as a first language? There are a lot of overlaps between the answers you just came up with there. I would be interested to see how those questions develop when you've now got a ready-made, long-form answer, as to why you may have chosen to write in English. Why do you think that question comes up?

**MJC:** I think several things. One thing is there aren't maybe that many ethnically Chinese or East Asian writers in England who are poets, first and foremost. Sarah Howe is definitely one of the most famous ones, she's a mentor of mine as well, but this assumption that OK, you clearly come from a bi-lingual background, you're an ESL speaker, I mean almost the question is 'What made you put in that extra effort and what makes you want to have to fight to stay in this realm that's not naturally yours?

And also obviously, there's sometimes a hint of slight racism, casual racism, like 'You look Chinese so you must be bi-lingual', sort of a question of 'Why are you here because you must be from China?' Obviously that overlooks the British Chinese, overlooks so many communities who are ethnically one thing, but they speak English and that's their only language. And then the question asked by a Chinese person from Hong Kong is utterly different. It's almost like,

well, we have a history of over 5000 years and we have all this literature and yes, the Tang dynasty of poetry, all that I grew up with, why are you abandoning that for Shakespeare?

Almost Tang poetry versus Shakespeare and why do you think Shakespeare is better than us? It's that implicit sense of 'why have you gained another heritage?' I'm trying to answer that through my poetry. My schooling was very particular. It wasn't like my parents sent me there for no reason, because it was a very good school and all the good schools in Hong Kong, they're not international schools.

It still remains the case that they are faith schools and they are all missionary schools, all established by the British during the colonial era, and that's not a coincidence that you find a lot of students in these schools, they have very good English, it's true, but also they're conflicted in terms of their identity, because of the way they've been taught, I think. Bit of a long answer.

**DT:** I'm glad you spoke of both aspects because it's easy in poetry and literature, in the South East of England particularly, to only get that view of 'come on, we want to embrace other languages, we're desperate for Arts Council funding, show us some otherness through your writing', but I suppose there's also a lot in your answer that fed into the ideas or feelings that make a pamphlet more exposing, because it brings up so many of these issues about why, if you're going to demand a space, are you doing it in a second language? Why are you not being true to yourself – but the self other people are imposing on you?

**MJC:** Exactly.

**DT:** Then this feeds into...

**MJC:** ...the notion of the other.

**DT:** Yes, and what it is to find your queer voice. We'll focus for the moment on how your mother is now more able to access your writing. I don't do this often, but I've noted a lot of lines from the pamphlet because a lot of things stood out. We'll take these as starting points, if you don't mind. This is from your poem Practice: 'I would head back home with a deepening sense of dread, my bruises fading to quiet'.

I'm wondering why we as writers try and write about home in that way. Who are we trying to talk to, the people we've left/turned our backs on/been pushed away from? Whatever's gone on, are we trying to talk to them or are we trying to explain to our readership what that was like?

**MJC:** I think I read somewhere that someone's first pamphlet or collection is usually their most personal or apparently personal, which is what Sharon Olds says. Because people rarely write their first thing as a themed thing. It's usually stuff you've been collecting over your entire life, or however long you've been writing, and then that coalesces into something seemingly unified because it's written by you, but usually people's first things are the most fragmented, oddly, because there's no clear theme. The theme might be family and queerness, but even that is quite broad.

Why do I write these things? Now that I'm looking at it, I'm seeing what it is as a totality. I do wonder 'Who was I writing it for?' First and foremost, it was probably just a way of processing things, because that poem in particular is about fencing as a sport. I was a fencer for over a decade in school and the reason why I started writing this poem in particular is that I was speaking to Natalie Teitler of The Complete Works programme, just over coffee one day. I'm not part of the program, but she was asking me what do I enjoy doing? I thought it was a bit of an odd question because we were there supposedly to talk about poetry.

I told her I used to be a fencer and she was like 'OK, you should write about that.' I was like 'No, there's nothing to write about because that was the sport I did.' She was like 'No, no, go back and think about it.' Oddly, the poem came very quickly because I realised fencing was so laden with symbolism, the way you camouflage yourself, the way you fence based on your gender. Obviously, it's very binary so there are women fencing teams and men fencing teams and there are feelings there.

There were people who were like me, I was exploring my queerness, but obviously not exploring it, so I was hiding from it through all the gear you wear as a fencer. You don't see any patch of skin once you're suited up and the duelling that happens between the two fencers on a piste, it's almost a kind of relationship, so I was like 'woah, this is very fruitful for what I'm trying to explore.' It was almost logical, being given permission to write about fencing as a sport, then I realised actually there was a lot there I could explore.

**DT:** It's nice when people give you permission to write about things you would have considered banal. This feeds into the pressure of 'please tell us about the otherness in your practice' to suddenly be told 'no, just write about that thing you did, that hobby or that sport you were made to play at school' because it's your life and of course these things will come out anyway, but they will hopefully come out in a way you're more comfortable with.

**MJC:** Exactly. There's a poem I haven't included in this pamphlet, I might include later in my full collection. It's called The Calligrapher. For a while, I was toying between writing about fencing and writing about calligraphy because I've practised both for over a decade and there's a sense of well, for an idealised Western audience, they would be expecting the calligraphy poem and by writing that calligraphy poem, it also satisfies something in terms of what my parents expected of me, which is to portray a certain kind of Chineseness to the world, then I was like well, actually, I wrote that poem and still I'm quite pleased with it, but the fencing poems were the ones that came organically, because it almost subverts both expectations, like maybe a Western audience wasn't expecting that you would be a Chinese fencer.

**DT:** I love the universality of that as well, the whole thing of being at school and fancying someone, but showing it through stabbing them a little bit and chasing them around a sports hall with a fake sword. That's just what obsessive love is at that age. What age were you?

**MJC:** This is like teenage.

**DT:** That's what I was imagining, I just wanted to check.

**MJC:** Well, not even knowing that was love or desire, because it was so forbidden.

**DT:** Obviously there's a different element to the queerness, but I think a lot of love at that age, that obsessive lust for someone, feels forbidden because you don't feel able to act on it either way if you're a young teenager. I think that's what really came through in that poem, it felt like you were writing just about the act and those things came out of it naturally, rather than trying to write, it feels like a pressure, especially on queer writers, to try and write about queerness in a different way.

**MJC:** It was a very organic process, so that surprised me in how the two dovetailed so well.

**DT:** The images of the blooming bruises I just thought was amazing, especially when it's implied the bruises are blooming beneath the costume, unseen, and all of this is happening beneath the surface. There's a lot of stuff happening beneath the surface in the pamphlet. I think we might take a second poem.

**MJC:**        Dragon Hill Spa  
                  *Seoul, South Korea*

It is the year 2016, but you know  
how women tame their own bodies  
  
into bones, dig their own graves in  
daylight. Here, for once, in a hot bath  
  
of rainbows, the bodies let themselves  
go, the water holds them up to the light,  
  
the lips murmur a prayer to skin. Here,  
the only hands that touch their wrists  
  
are their own. Here is no-man's land.  
Here, the names of soldiers, heavy-  
  
handed, are forgotten. Here, no one  
takes what they want from the women  
  
whose gods are freely chosen,  
whose bones are theirs to bury.

©Mary Jean Chan, *a hurry of english*, Ignition Press 2018

**DT:** We can't go too much further in the conversation without talking about your mother. I don't want to focus too much on your personal relationship, that's not what we're here for and if people read the pamphlet, they'll get enough out of it because I do think the poems do speak clearly enough for themselves, but as writers in general, this idea of your mother and this shroud-like image that comes through, there's a duality to your mother in these poems.

She seems both oppressive, yet detached, and a constant, but also a distant and that seems clear through poems that are set while you've been in London, but also at home. I wonder why we obsessively write about these things we're seemingly trying to escape? I'm worried about framing that question, because I'm not trying to suggest you're trying to escape your mother through these poems, but there's a feeling which is quite common through a lot of people's writing.

**MJC:** Yeah, it is very interesting. You can look at it from a slightly psychoanalytic point of view, that the mother-child relationship is always a very fraught one, it's one of the most important ones. What was it that DW Winnicott said? Before you realise there's a mirror, the child sees that the mirror is the mother's face, because that's the first object you attach yourself to. I'm probably butchering this a little bit.

I'm interested in that relationship, that intensity, and you know when you talk to queer youth in general, it doesn't really matter which culture you're from, the fear with coming out is always, well, often, the fear of disappointing your parents and usually, it's the mother. You can see any person talking about that and somehow, it's always fraught, it doesn't matter what gender you are or where you're from, the sense of 'I can't tell my mother'.

I'm curious about that as well, why we feel that sense of loyalty, the sense of 'I can't betray her by being myself' and also there's an actual act of departure, we all grow up and we all leave. Because the mother is usually the person – obviously, it's different in a queer relationship, you might have two fathers instead – but growing up in the family I did, my mum was a quintessential housewife, we spent so much time together while my father, he's a doctor, was out working. That bond to me always felt so intense.

When you picked up on that sense of my mother was everywhere, she was and she still is. I almost say things like 'this is my mother's room' and my partner would be like 'no, it's your parents' room. Where's your dad?' Or 'this is my mother's something something', but actually it's my parents'. My father feels, not that he's not there, but he doesn't feel that same emotional impact on me in terms of seeing him everywhere.

Maybe going back to poetry, it's a sense of I want to write about my mother because there was a lot I couldn't say for many years and I turned to writing as a way of comforting myself, a way of figuring things out, a way of almost apologising, a way of almost writing this unseen letter to my mother, explaining everything to her, so that one day, she might understand. You know, a way of setting myself up for something, that eventual coming out. All these poems are from prior to coming out, the seeds of those poems.

So yeah, maybe it's a way to justify myself, to explain myself. Also, and this is one thing I haven't talked about in any interviews so far, my mother, her first job in Hong Kong, was a writing job. She was a scriptwriter for a local television station. So my mother is actually an amazing writer in Chinese and she's now currently writing a drama script, which potentially might be made into a play on stage, but obviously very casually and as an amateur writer, because she's not in the writing profession.

Knowing my mother wrote for a few years and that was what sustained her, that was a weird coming full circle.

**DT:** Does that feed into writing in English as well? It gives you a distance from your mother's writing career?

**MJC:** Maybe subconsciously that is a thing of charting out my own space. Certainly, I know my mum always encouraged me to read and oddly, would buy me English books and you'd think how would that work, because she wouldn't know what was on the jacket cover? But she would buy me these English books because she liked the cover art, for example, but that act of so generously trying to introduce me to another language as well, is to me quite fraught and quite poignant. She could have just bought me Chinese books, but she also bought me English books, which is what is interesting, I think.

**DT:** I suppose it comes back to this idea of the perceived impression that writers are trying to reinvent themselves. It's interesting that we use poetry as a way of reinventing others in our life, sorry, what was the title?

**MJC:** Conversation With Fantasy Mother.

**DT:** Yes, Conversation With FantasyMother does that very well, in which you write to a person, that is freely listening to you, in a way you might want to happen. This is playing on my mind a lot. I chatted to Caroline Bird a lot in the most recent episode, not specifically about relationships with parents, but more confronting ideas about shame and guilt in poetry, wherever they come from, but this is also feeding into I have a lot to write about my own relationship with my mother.

I never have and as yet, have not been able to and it left me quite emotional after reading some of the poems in your book, because you've done some of the things I wish I could do myself and still feel unable to do. It may also be clouding the way I'm asking the questions. I may be making them slightly too personal?

**MJC:** I'm thinking also, some of these poems, I do use the mother figure as a trope as well, so it doesn't necessarily have to be my mother and some of the things I include in here, she has never said. I got bogged down in quite a few poems a few months ago, probably, when somehow I fell into the trap of thinking what was the actual truth? What did she actually say or not say and then realising through my current supervision, I'm a PhD candidate as well, I work with Jo Shapcott and she's an amazing mentor and poet.

She's like 'Mary Jean, remember poetry is also an act of creation. It's like fiction, you have the permission and the right to invent and imagine. Once I let go of that ostensible need to write documentary truth, then more poems came up, the fantasy mother poem came up because for me, that could be a poem written about any mother. It really is just about the universality of queerness.

**DT:** I think that's why this pamphlet feels so complete, because it talks of these things in a very universal way. It doesn't feel too much like a diary, which it perhaps can do if you're

trying to document the truth of what really happened. For the listeners' benefit, I'm doing air quotes at the moment. There's something I haven't managed to free myself from when talking about that and it may be I'm finding it too difficult to move away from the truth, whatever that means.

I completely agree, the truth isn't that relevant in terms of trying to communicate a feeling, the truth around events and what people have said, as long as you're not libelling people and coming up with complete falsehoods, I think you do need elements of fiction in your writing to make it relatable to readers.

**MJC:** Also, not forcibly make it a universal piece because specificity is so important and I can only really write from my own experience, but I've increasingly realised that sometimes, poetry is about hope as well, it's about what you hoped could have happened. It's about your vision for maybe a better world or a more compassionate world, so sometimes people will do magical realism for example, or the surrealist art, that kind of freedom to imagine a scenario and to convey something through that.

Artists have been doing it for ages and fiction writers as well. For example, Sophie Collins, she had her recent debut collection from Faber, there were a lot of moments I was wondering 'did this really happen?' but that's precisely what she is trying to subvert, the idea that the 'I' is not meant to be a documentary 'I' and all these, especially women, who write about themselves, it's automatically taken that it's 'this is your intimate document of your life', whereas men can write fiction.

I think all of that is in the background as well, but obviously for me, it's even more layered because it's not just about white men and white women, I'm also queer and there's all those other layers added on that. I'm not naïve enough to think that... Obviously, I'm a woman and I'm writing about my mother, it's all too easy for people to say 'this is the document of your life and your mother, all of this is true'.

Maybe because that is easily perceived as such, my mother can feel conflicted and betrayed and that's stuff I'm currently dealing with, but yes, I still feel in order to write at all, I need to free myself from those constraints.

**DT:** My dad's mum died when I was about 16. She was notorious for telling stories where the things she was telling you she said, she didn't say them, but you wouldn't class what she was saying as a lie. They were embellishments in order to get a point across and I've always found the way I write to be closer to the way people tell stories in pubs, that idea that when you walk away from not an argument, maybe just a confrontation with someone you don't really know and you've been a bit surprised, you come away and you're like 'this is what I should have said, I should have bloody said this' and that's what I feel poems are. They're in the moment when you're able to be clearer about things and that involve embellishing what's happened or adding details.

**MJC:** I think poetry, this is my work, so I can't be divorced from it, but it's also a thing that once someone has written something, then it's out in the world, it's its own entity, so as much as you can take responsibility for it, you also need to let it go and it needs to do whatever it

does, in relationship to another reader. That is the work I think poetry does. I've read poets from around the world, across cultures and for those poets' work to speak to me, for example Adrienne Rich, who is always the person I speak about, who really opened up poetry for me.

She was writing in the 1960s, white lesbian, feminist in America. She's Jewish as well. I couldn't be more culturally different from her, but her voice spoke to me. It was something I slept with, I had her books beside me when I slept, on my bedside table and for that to happen, it's something about language, it transcends a lot of these things we think are immutable and I think the work she did for my life and on my life, it's just something maybe I hope my writing will do for another person. You just have to let it go. I can't define what it might do or might not do.

**DT:** It's so odd, imagining that something you've made may have that effect, but it's really beautiful. That leads nicely into something I wanted to ask about. Without breaking the flow, my sibling Tiegán is doing some work experience. I'm 19 years older than Tiegán and this idea that they are doing work experience for me is making me feel incredibly old, but as part of the work experience, I asked Tiegán to come up with some draft questions for you, based on the pamphlet, then I did some feedback.

It wasn't my intention that the questions should come into the programme unless they were relevant and this one is relevant. The original question centred around the mental health of queer people, specifically. It, sort of, opened up into this idea of how as an emerging or established writer, do you use your position to reassure readers who don't have a voice that there is someone who's experiencing the same thing?

**MJC:** I think when someone starts writing, certainly the mentality I had when writing all these poems, it wasn't this sense of 'wow, I'm going to create a document that's going to save someone's life', but because so many other writers have done that for me, literally sometimes I think books shore me up, when I'm feeling anxious or worried or just kind of frazzled, I go into a bookstore or library. Being surrounded by books, I feel safe because of the sense of these documents accepting me, these breathing things are sensibilities who will accept me for who I am.

Maybe the hope is, I can only really write from what I know and what I believe in, but increasingly now, there are people who are queer and Asian and they either message me on Twitter or talk to me in person and they say 'your work is important to me' or 'your poetry really touches me'. Obviously there is a sense of surprise, because you're not prepared for that. You don't have, as much as people talk about readership, you really don't have a readership in mind when you write, I think.

If you're thinking too much of your readership, it's going to cause a writer's block, but I am touched and I feel yeah, if that's what my work is doing, then I might be on the right path. At the same time, because I'm still struggling with my own, I suppose, sense of shame, over being queer, let alone being a queer mouthpiece, there's almost a sense of 'oh gosh, what am I doing? I'm really putting myself out there now, I'm really going against some of the things my parents...'

You know, they would be content for me to write poetry, but not to speak about being queer. Maybe that's one step too far, but it's all part of the same thing and I think if I stopped speaking about being queer, that would also be false and that would not make sense. Having observed how poets act and behave, they do become touchstones for other people. When people ask me who are my favourite poets, there are just so many, because they all do something different for me.

Sarah Howe, for example, gave me permission to write about Hong Kong. Emily Berry gave me permission to write about my mother. Just in the ways they do it, you know? It's not just thematic, it's the ways they're able to access that material is so new and so special, I was like 'wow'. I didn't know you could do that with such an old theme, for example. Obviously Adrienne Rich, writing about female relationships, again, I had no idea you could write a love poem like that... her *Twenty-One Love Poems*. I suppose, if one day my work becomes that for someone, that's perfect.

**DT:** Having spent time in psychiatric units, my own mental illness being prevalent through my whole life and those of loved ones, it really annoys me when people miss the point that these individual stories from other backgrounds and experiences are not merely an attempt at diversity, they're actually an attempt to communicate with people in a way they may relate to.

It makes me furious, and I'll try not to talk about this too much, but this misunderstanding that access to this kind of writing we've just been talking about, whether it's different aspects that may give you permission to write about Hong Kong, or your mother, then the queer writers you enjoy as well, then the idea that access to literature that doesn't sit within – and I'm going to do air quotes again, because I hate using this word – the 'norm' of what is the established canon here, is merely an attempt at diversity when that isn't what people are asking for.

They're not asking necessarily for a diverse canon, what they are asking for is representation and access for people. Like you're saying, this is not an over-exaggeration to suggest this may be a lifeline for someone. I'm not putting the weight on your works specifically, this could be any writer that talks about any experience.

**MJC:** I think it's very interesting you brought that up and the notion of diversity because obviously, I'm very conscious of the landscape now, increasingly, and being a part of different schemes, like the Ledbury Emerging Critics scheme, again spearheaded by Sarah [Howe] and Sandeep Palmer. You sometimes do feel very small, because you think these are the statistics, the odds are stacked against people who are not white, you can go down the list, not queer, not disabled, for example, but that's the norm.

Then everyone else who owns multiple identities has become well, it's almost like writing is overwhelmingly white and the establishment is as well when you go into publishing, but I've been very fortunate because I think I've had mentors who've been able to help me, I suppose, realise the odds, but also try to not be weighed down by that too much. My agent, for example, Emma Patterson, is mixed-race, she is very able to talk to me about these issues of

being a writer of colour, being an agent of colour, and how do you resist being exoticized or exoticizing yourself, but also trying to tell the story of who you are?

You know, we even have these debates about whether or not you should ever mention rice in a poem. You have poets who fall on completely different sides. You've got people saying never, ever mention mango or rice because you're giving people an excuse to exotify you. Then I think I do eat rice all the time.

We would never put that much pressure on someone's piece of bread because that's what they eat every morning, but because we're writers in a world that's not equal, our bowl of rice gets so laden with symbolism that sometimes, I do still include tea and rice, even though I know that's a label, but because I drink green tea all the time and I eat rice every day.

That is the truth for me, as a person of colour. It would be fake to put in spaghetti and bread, because even though I eat it as well, that's not for me something I want to write about. So long story short, I think you're very right to pick up on that token diversity that we're supposed to perform as writers of colour, but I definitely want to resist that and I don't know if I'm succeeding. But that's something I think about as well.

**DT:** I think what annoys me further in that is that it shouldn't be left to the poets themselves, because this is where I think as an industry we're falling into the realms of purely diversity for diversity's sake because you have a lot of well-intentioned, well-meaning producers and a lot of writers of colour getting some fantastic opportunities, mainly still in the South East, which needs to be sorted out, it needs to be more nationwide and more representative of what the UK is, but I think there are too many people being protective of their own jobs in the slightly higher tiers, the publishers and editors.

I think until you have those roles filled more representationally, you're still going to get writers that feel like they're being exoticized. I spoke to Byron Vincent about this. We both had similar backgrounds, we've [got] mental-health problems and working-class backgrounds and how that then feels, how you go from a very heavy working-class background to poetry, then the conflict of how you've grown up and this field you're trying to move into and this pressure on the working-class writer to be miserable.

There has to be pain in your work, there has to be trauma, because people who haven't been through those experiences only understand the attraction of the trauma in your work and there may not be any trauma. There has been trauma in my life, but it isn't because I'm working class, it's because I'm bi-polar and hadn't faced up to that early enough and I tried to hide from that. That's where the trauma came from and I should be free to choose.

Until you have people in positions, I mean Kit De Waal is doing some amazing work for writers of colour and there's a big overlap working-class stuff she's doing at the moment and I'm really excited for this Unbound, Common People anthology that's going to come out soon, and there is work happening there, but it still feels so slow, doesn't it?

**MJC:** You're so right and precisely you pointed out the fact that whether you have writers of colour, that's the start, but you also need people who are in the business of publishing and

all that who will look at your story and understand the point of it is precisely your complexity, not your skin colour. Even though we want to value writers of colour, we shouldn't be in the business of valuing each other because of a certain type of skin colour and that's who you are.

Clearly, we want more human stories across the board. If you're a writer of colour who wants to be accepted by the establishment, you need to perform your identity, you need to be a certain way so we can package you and market you and draw certain audiences. It also has to do with the capitalist framework of buying and selling books.

I'm also increasingly aware, it's very apparent to people who don't live in the metropolis of the colonial empire, for example in Hong Kong, if you write in English and publish in Hong Kong, you do know that the legitimacy you get from that is not as much as if you were published in the States or the UK. Your work is repatriated. So you can go back and say 'look, I've been legitimised by the establishment that is not here, not home, and I'm going to bring that work back and then people will read you'.

That's how it works. It's capitalism, it's politics, it's also history. I think a lot of post-colonial writers face that same issue. They're actually from India, but Oxford University Press needs to publish it in London before it can be brought back home to India and celebrated. There's a reason why I'm here in London, there's a reason why so many writers from other parts of the world come to these centres because there's also a sense of there really is no other way you can make something viable.

Obviously, I left for other reasons, it's not just that I needed to come to the centre of empire. It's also the understanding that I would get better training here, you could meet other poets that you've read for your GCSEs, which would not happen were you back home, but that's a reality and I think people need to talk about the complexities of publishing and the power relation that occurs.

**DT:** One of the reasons I had such a good time recently at Verve Poetry Festival is that shift of power. I mean, I'm from London, I was born in Westminster, I couldn't be any more central and I do love this city. We're in London now, I love where we are, I love the city, but it doesn't sit very well with me, even just in the UK, you can't have this huge imbalance where poets from Yorkshire, Derbyshire or Cumbria feeling they have to move to London in order to have a career. That isn't right. Having that shift of control, I do think certain people just need to stand up and take it.

Verve hasn't happened because the Poetry Society decided they wanted something to happen in the regions. That isn't what happened. A couple of people got bored of the fact they had to keep going to London and thought 'let's start something'. Unfortunately, not everyone feels like that's in their power, to start something like that. It's what we're saying, as a young or emerging writer, no matter your identity, I think people are starting to feel more comfortable about getting published, but that doesn't mean you've necessarily got control over your work.

**MJC:** No, so much of it is contingent on privilege of all sorts, institutional privilege, economic privilege, social privilege. A lot of reasons why I've got to where I am is I have a tremendous amount of institutional privilege. I've been to quite a few universities where those networks allowed me to then get things published. I was part of the Oxford University Poetry Society, there you met people you otherwise wouldn't have met who are active in the literary world.

Despite being a queer woman of colour, I am Chinese and I'm not naïve enough to think that doesn't matter, because even though we talk about BAME or people of colour, obviously there are different realities. I'm from Hong Kong, born and raised there, I left when I was 19, so I did grow up for a significant part of my life not feeling like I was a minority. I was a majority in Hong Kong.

I think that has an impact. We were talking about mental health and all that, it has an impact on your psyche. I didn't grow up Asian-American or British-Chinese, feeling all the time that I was invisible. I was clearly visible apart from being a woman, I wasn't out, so I was a straight Chinese woman ostensibly. That gives you a lot of power, obviously not in relation to Chinese men, but you see what I mean.

Then coming to the States, then coming to the UK and realising I was part of a minority, that actually took a mind shift. Initially, when people kept telling you to come to women of colour meetings when I was in the US doing my undergraduate study, I thought they'd gotten it wrong. I was like 'I'm not a woman of colour, you mean maybe Asian-American', but they were like 'no, you are a woman of colour'.

Obviously, you eventually realise a lot of different things, like I'm a queer woman of colour, but yeah, so the mental-health aspect you were alluding to earlier, I think I have a lot of things to deal with in terms of shame in relation to being queer and all of that, but I don't suffer as much from a sense of 'I'm a racial minority'.

**DT:** Interesting. There's a lot of overlaps here from when I had a conversation with Andra Simons, who's from Bermuda originally. He, in his words, wasn't black until he came to London. He grew up on an island where he was in the majority. In his mind, his creative practice revolved around, and these are his words, being a 'fat, gay man'. That was what set him apart as a young man and that's what formed his identity.

Being black wasn't even a consideration for him until he moved to London, so when he came to the UK, to suddenly be identified and exoticised in London, in the gay community as being a black Caribbean man. This idea of shame and I think we're going to finish on this question, because it's nice, it's poetry, we don't want to finish on a high!

I just wonder, this comes up with a lot of people, but is poetry the right place to be confronting shame? Or is it just a place to dwell?

**MJC:** OK, I suppose to answer that question, I'll just refer to one of my favourite writers, Jeanette Winterson, who is a novelist, a lesbian. A lot of people know her for her first book, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. She actually, I have heard her live at an event 'Is literature

basically something that traumatises people?’ because you have a high correlation between artists and suicide and all that.

I think what she said was literature is always on the side of health. It is always a means to live better. The reason we find a lot of trauma being written about, it’s not that it helps us stay in that place, I really don’t believe that, I think we write through things. I think there might be tears shed, there might be realisations, there might be feelings of shame, but really it is much better to be conscious of them than to have them stuck inside you.

I believe in psychotherapy, for example, and that is all about bringing unconscious things into your consciousness and then you can make different choices about your life. I think poetry has helped me make so many different choices that I would not otherwise have had the courage to make. As a reader and now a writer, I’ve been able to write through shame, write through trauma, all these different aspects of my life, and have a much clearer sense of where I am and who I am, in relation to other people as well.

Obviously, poetry is this invisible community because I read so many poets of colour, writers of colour, poets in translation, and you just feel you’ve got so many friends, so many mentors, invisible mentors. I can go anywhere in the world and I can bring my Adrienne Rich, I can bring my Emily Berry, I can bring my Mona Arshi, then they will be with me, confronting whatever I’m confronting in my life.

I think that for me is why poetry is always about health rather than shame or illness.

**DT:** Dammit, you’ve made me finish on a high. We’re running out of time, so we’ll finish with a poem please, Mary Jean.

**MJC:** OK, thanks. I’ll end with this poem that ends the entire pamphlet.

### Tea Ceremony

There are days when I pretend  
to understand my mother’s grief,

as I coax her into sitting at the table  
for a tea ceremony, so she might linger

on the rush of green into glass,  
how the scent of leaf dissolves

both past and future in one gulp.  
We drink in a serene silence,

my mother smiles a smile that  
breaks my breath into laughter.

She is radiant now, lost in the kettle's  
repetitive chant, her gaze fixed on  
  
the dance of fingers between utensils.  
I love my mother's joy, her reprieve  
  
from the sorrow of Red-Guarded nights.  
Time is a wound she adorns with designer  
  
clothing and too many sleeping pills.  
I tell her *Go to bed*. She says *I can't*.

*Can you stay?* As a child, I dreaded  
her desperate need, my hand resting

on her forehead, unable to let go.  
Even now, with Freud and Jung

as bedside reading, I can only  
invite her to the table: *Look,*

*mother, your hands are beautiful.*  
*Look, mother, our tea is ready.*

©Mary Jean Chan, *a hurry of english*, Ignition Press 2018

**DT:** You have one of my favourite reading voices and I'm really glad the snow didn't keep us apart this weekend and we've been able to record this interview.

**M JC:** Thank you so much.

### **Part two:**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Sandeep K Parmar – **SKP**

**DT:** Hello, you stuck around. If you want to hear more, you can catch Mary Jean reading at the various launch events for the Carcanet New Poetries VII, such as The Crypt on the Green, April 30<sup>th</sup>, or All Souls College, Oxford, May 4<sup>th</sup>. I'm not going to list too many dates as I'm recording this intro far too early in April. As mentioned before, Lizzy and I are off to Berlin tomorrow. The best thing to do is go over to [www.maryjeanchan.com/appearances](http://www.maryjeanchan.com/appearances) for a full list of reading dates. Do go and check out Mary Jean reading, she is fantastic.

I don't normally use this series for self-promotion, but I'm going to bend my own slightly self-imposed rules on this occasion. I'm very happy to say I have some writing coming up in the first of a new series of pamphlets entitled *Cities*, published by Dostoevsky Wannabe. The first of this series is based in Bristol and will feature work by myself, Sarer Scotthorne, Vik Shirley, Clive Birnie, Paul Hawkins, who is editing the Bristol Pamphlet and most excitingly, my wife Lizzy, who is also the editor of our accompanying podcast, *A Poem A Week*.

If you want to come and see us all read our work, then get along to Rough Trade in Bristol, on Saturday April 28<sup>th</sup> at 2.30pm. With that being plenty of blowing my own trumpet, next up is a conversation with Sandeep K Parmar, which as I mentioned before, was recorded live at this year's Verve Poetry Festival in Birmingham.

We met up on the world's tiniest festival stage to chat about how poems change over time and how our relationship to them may change in the time it takes to write, edit, publish then finally launch a collection of writing. We touch on whether poems are always retrospective, or if they can ever live in the moment, and what role live literature events play in the development of Sandeep's writing.

At the beginning, I wrongly introduce Sandeep as a senior lecturer at the University of Liverpool. She is in fact a professor there. If you are the kind of person that likes to write reviews on iTunes, why not write one for us? We've already had some fantastic reviews left by our lovely listeners, which you can see over in the Feedback section on our website, or indeed over at iTunes.

Do go and check out *Elevated Thoughts*. Here's Sandeep.

### **Conversation:**

**DT:** Hello, Verve, how are you doing? Give us some noise, come on. Really good. I was going to make a rule at the beginning, no normal poetry audience nonsense, by which I mean make lots of noise, but Verve are instilling that excitement in you anyway. I am now joined by Sandeep Parmar, a poet, critic and senior lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool.

She has published two collections of poetry, the first of which I think we're going to hear from in a moment, *The Marble Orchard*. The second, I don't know how to pronounce that...

**SKP:** *Eidolon*.

**DT:** *Eidolon*, which won the Ledbury Forte prize for Best Second Collection. We're going to start with a reading.

**SKP:** So I'm going to read the first poem from my first collection, *The Marble Orchard*. It's called *Invocation*.

**We do not have permission to reproduce this poem.**

**DT:** Thank you very much, Sandeep. 'Trenchant penurist'. I really like that phrase.

**SKP:** It's a really good question, I'm not entirely sure what that means, especially since it's been many years since I wrote it, but I think that's really good, that idea, it's something James Brookes was talking about in the last panel, sometimes language just comes to us and it doesn't even necessarily communicate something to us, beyond the idea of the sound or some sort of association. I'm not actually able to define that.

**DT:** When was this collection published?

**SKP:** 2011.

**DT:** So it's been seven years, then add on however many years since you wrote the poems, it must be strange revisiting it. Does it take on a new meaning for you when you come and read live?

**SKP:** I think so. For this collection as well, it was an accumulation of many years of work and definitely the poems that I wrote quite early on in that, probably the oldest poem is from the late 90s, so I was certainly a different person from the poems I wrote at the end. I guess that kind of event of the lyric or the poem, is something that unless you can kind of climb back into it, you don't really remember what it is it means, so when you revisit that, it seems like a remote person in a remote country.

**DT:** It's something that comes up a lot in the series, talking to other poets, that because it's such a drawn-out process releasing the collection, years spent just writing the poems, then the editing process starts, then actually putting the book together, you can sometimes – I'm not accusing you of this, because you've come in rejuvenated – but you can see often that poets are maybe a little jaded with what they're coming back to, because it's been such an exhaustive process. Is it nice to now come back and have that gap to revisit older stuff or is it still riven with angst inside of you?

**SKP:** I think in some ways it's more pleasurable to read from this book than it is perhaps to read from the collection I'm going to be reading from tonight, which is the one that won a prize and I'm having to read from quite a lot now. This is the kind of non-prizewinning, the book that nobody read, so it feels kind of like I'm doing it some sort of service by reading those poems, but no, I suppose probably for any poet, the experience of reading from a book is a kind of state of being you're no longer in and the work you're producing at the moment is always going to be the most exciting to you.

Sometimes, that takes a long time, sometimes you don't feel comfortable enough to be able to read from those poems, but I'm already well ahead of both of these books and reluctant to read from them, actually.

**DT:** Can a poem ever be reflective of the moment you're in or is it always looking back at something?

**SKP:** Well, we talk about the lyric in sort of a traditional way. The lyric form tends to be a presence that is always looking backwards, so that present moment that is always receding into the past and taking versions of us with it. It's still, the moment of writing, whatever it is that drives you to put those words down on the page, is a kind of moment in itself, so there are kind of two moments, three moments, being balanced by the poem at the same time.

You can kind of try to remember why it is you wrote it, you may not be able to conjure the state it refers to necessarily, or in fact the moment the state refers to tangentially as well.

**DT:** But we're not saying all poems are memories, are we?

**SKP:** No.

**DT:** They're not an act of remembering, are they?

**SKP:** I think in the really traditional sense, poems can be, but those are not the poems I'm interested in writing, although having said that, I'm probably going to read another poem that's very much along those lines. No, now I suppose the difference between this book and my second book is I discovered lots of Modernist women writers, who formed the basis of my scholarly research, and so think now more about how to shape language, how language shapes us in the process.

I'm much more a kind of language or experimental poet and poem-inspired practice so no, I really detest that kind of intimate, supposedly genuine, but actually quite artificial space that the lyric creates. I avoid it as much as I can and I find it really aggravating to read it in others as well, though I try to be polite about it.

**DT:** This shaping of language, what role do live readings and events like Verve Poetry Festival play in helping you shape language?

**SKP:** I suppose in a way, even if you're the kind of poet who's doing process-driven work, where you're really trying to exclude the 'I' or the lyric speaker or the poet's voice, whatever that means, no matter how you fit into style and method and technique, you're still thinking about a kind of audience, a kind of reader, and in a sense, being at a festival, you're confronted with those people, sometimes, who may read your work or may have read your work and that changes the context for you to the work you're writing, sometimes in ways that are really uncomfortable, sometimes in ways that are quite generous on their part and quite rewarding on the part of the poet, or of course that can all go horribly wrong.

But I think poetry, certainly in Britain, is a community, a small community, places like this are times when you see people who you've been reading and that's always quite nice and I guess it gives us an embodied sense that the poets we read are real people. Speaking as a critic, I think that's really useful for me to remember, that it's not just the text I'm looking at, but actually the kind of person who is there, doing something, conjuring in some way the work.

**DT:** Talking of yourself as a critic, is that something you do as well as writing poetry?

**SKP:** Yeah, I write about early 20<sup>th</sup>-century women's writing, women poets, so Nancy Cunard, Hope Mirrlees, Mina Lloyd. I also write about contemporary poetry and race, and I'm a reviewer, so I review for lots of different places. I think that my concerns are always the ways in which the work is going to be most appreciated and how to provide that kind of context and how to redress the historical imbalances, how we read, because books in themselves, we encounter them in all kinds of different ways and the critic's job, whether you're a reviewer or a scholar, is to put those things in context.

There's no such thing as an ordinary kind of genius in any sort of book. Everything responds to something else and it's the critic's responsibility to be able to recognise those things and give that context to the reader.

**DT:** Another thing that comes up in the series is most poets hold a dual role, they're editors and writers, they're critics and writers, producers and writers. Are you able to be a critic and writer at the same time or are they two separate roles? Obviously they overlap, but...

**SKP:** Yeah, as a kind of state of being. In my experience at least, being a critic changed the way that I wrote and I felt that I wasn't able to be... I definitely read myself more in terms of thinking about the tradition after I became a critic, which is a shame, I think you lose something when you become an academic particularly, with academic writing, because you're so focused on being coherent and reasoned, whereas in effect poetry for me doesn't come from those kinds of places.

The way that language arrives for me as a critic is very different, it has an effect on how I write as a poet, but having said that, there are a lot of really great poets who manage to combine those things in the lyric essays, with Nuar Alsadir's work, Claudia Rankine's book *Lyric Essays* and so in a way, that's kind of exciting because there is a generation of writers who feel they can hybridise those forms and bring in philosophy and a critical voice or a lyrical voice that isn't necessarily broken into verse or lines, which is also quite exciting.

**DT:** I hate those people that can do both, they're the worst. Since running this series, I found it began to really stifle my own writing because I started to think in quite a mechanical – that's the wrong term, but I can't think of a better term and we're running out of time – but the thought processes around writing became very much 'how would I structure a programme? How would I communicate that to an audience?' I started to apply those things to my own writing and then you stop playing, in a way.

**SKP:** Yeah, I think you feel less free to play. I suppose you learn the rules better and you learn new rules and knowing the rules helps you break them. So I suppose in some ways, it's just about turning that to your advantage somehow. It doesn't do anyone any good to write work that feels not banal, but that it's been done before. So actually it's a challenge for the writer to be able to stand up against any form of tradition, canon or even those writers that are marginal to it, to be able to say 'here is something I'm contributing that is fairly new or relevant'.

**DT:** Unfortunately, these chats are too short. So we don't run over, we might finish on a reading, if that's OK.

**SKP:** Thank you. I never write in form, but I'm going to read a poem that is a very bad, it's a failed ghazal. Against Chaos.

**We do not have permission to reproduce this poem.**

**DT:** Let's all go and join in the celebrations for Jane Commane's launch in that room over there. Thank you.

**End of transcript.**