

Africa Writes Young Voices

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The Royal African Society

An anthology of work by students at

Phoenix Place

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Africa Writes: Young Voices is a creative writing education programme designed and delivered by the Royal African Society in partnership with professional writers from the Africa Writes Festival community.

The poems in this anthology were written by students at Phoenix Place school in a series of workshops facilitated by Rachel Long, Theresa Lola and Amina Jama of Octavia Poetry Collective for Women of Colour.

Anthology design by D237.

Thanks to the generous funders of our education programme, Arts Council England and the Foyle Foundation.

For more information about the Royal African Society Education Programme, please contact Joanna Brown, RAS Education and Outreach Programme Manager at ras_education@soas.ac.uk.



Contents

The Royal African Society and Africa Writes: Young Voices	07
Octavia Poetry Collective	10
Poetry by students at Phoenix Place, 2017	15
Poetry by students at Phoenix Place, 2018	37

The Royal African Society and Africa Writes: Young Voices

Royal African Society

The Royal African Society is a membership organisation that provides opportunities for people to connect, celebrate and engage critically with a wide range of topics and ideas about Africa today. Through our events, publications and digital channels we share insight, instigate debate and facilitate mutual understanding between the UK and Africa. We amplify African voices and interests in academia, business, politics, the arts and education, reaching a network of more than one million people globally.

www.royalafricansociety.org

Africa Writes Festival

Africa Writes is the Royal African Society's annual literature festival. Every year we showcase established and emerging talent from the African continent and its diaspora in what is now the UK's biggest celebration of contemporary African writing taking place over an exciting summer weekend in July. The festival takes place at the British Library and features book launches, readings, author appearances, panel discussions, youth and children's workshops and other activities.

www.africawrites.org

Africa Writes: Young Voices

Africa Writes: Young Voices is the flagship project of the Royal African Society's education programme. Committed to championing African literature and inspiring the writers of the future, we connect young people directly with poets and writers from the Africa Writes Festival community.

We work in partnership with key organisations such as the British Library, universities, museums and teaching associations to deliver our programme. Workshops are led by professional writers and facilitators and may take place within exhibitions, museum spaces or in schools.

2018 is the second year of the Africa Writes: Young Voices project. Using African art forms such as literature, spoken word, proverbs, music, visual art and photography, the workshops were designed to inspire and guide school students to create their own pieces of poetry or narrative fiction in response. Our students writers were also supported to develop live performances of their own work for a showcase event for their school community.

We are delighted to be presenting this anthology of work produced by the extraordinary young people we have been working with this year.

Our thanks to our funders, Arts Council England and the Foyle Foundation, for their generous support. Thank you also to the fantastic teachers who have worked alongside us, creating spaces in schools for us to work with their students, and of course to our community of poets, who, by sharing their own work, their time, their ideas and their love of literature, continue to inspire new generations of Young Voices.

Octavia Poetry Collective for Women of Colour

Rachel Long

That this anthology now exists - that it is holdable, readable, out in the world - is an incredible thing. Within these pages are the voices of young women who were initially reluctant to speak, or to write.

Our first workshop at Phoenix Place back in the early summer of 2017 was a struggle - they'll tell you, grinning no doubt - the girls of Phoenix Place were hard customers! They could almost not be convinced of poetry's relevance let alone its possible power or beauty. Theresa and I had our work cut out, but perhaps because we remembered being girls, growing up harder than the girls on TV, or in our magazines, we framed writing exercises with them in mind, we selected poems in which they might see themselves, resembling something of their lives, their stories. We encouraged them to speak to the page, rage on it if they wanted/needed to, and then try to trust it, in the hope that it might become a place where they could say how they felt - for once, for the first time, for the thousandth time but now we were listening. We were saying it could be writing, more than - that their stories could be poetry, that they might be poets.

I am incredibly proud, and I am in awe of every word each young brilliant woman wrote throughout our sessions. It was a joy to be there each Tuesday in June, to be a witness to how poetry can change from a slammed door to the brightest smile. What they have written and recorded here is exceptional, as they are. As their teachers are, as Phoenix Place is.

Theresa Lola

Running the poetry workshop alongside Rachel Long at Phoenix Place School was a richly satisfying experience. We conversed with the young women about life and the concerns plaguing young people today through poetry, poems by other women such as Safia Elhillo and Warsan Shire and watching them bloom from initial timidity and resistance to reading their poems to family members and friends with excitement and confidence at the showcase was mesmerizing. Rachel Long heads the Octavia Women of Colour collective which I am a part of and the workshops with the young women felt like an extension of that sisterhood. The main poems the young women wrote were in response to the Autograph ABP collection of the first photos ever taken of Black and Asian people in the UK, and their poems posed questions, considered answers that were inspiring in how far representation has come but also in recognising pain when it is there. Overall the work of African poets have proved to be instrumental in documenting every step of the way and it was fantastic to share it with the young women and have it spring conversations and of course poems.

Amina Jama

My first introduction of poetry was participating in workshops which led me to join the Octavia collective. Personally I write mostly to process my surroundings and about people. When the opportunity came to facilitate myself, it was humbling and terrifying. Leading up to the four weeks at Phoenix Place, the group participated in

a photography workshop led by the Autograph Gallery. This was a hands-on experience with the archive with the opportunity to ask any questions and recreate their own photographs. The girls from Phoenix Place excelled and loved this experience. Personally it was a beautiful occasion to meet them and get to know them. This heavily influenced how I looked at planning activities for the workshops. I delivered exercises surrounding poems about hair and identity looking at Jamila Woods poem 'My Afropuffs' and at inspirational people in their lives. The poems they created were beyond what we asked, they were nuanced and thoughtful. Working alongside Rachel was a dream and working with the girls from Phoenix Place made this transition into facilitating an incredible one.

Poetry by students at Phoenix Place, 2017

UNTITLED

by Toniianne

Are you poor
Do you have a job
When is your birthday
Where were you born
How old are your children
Are you getting married
Do you have family
Do you live alone
How old was your mother when she had you
Is she still alive?

You could be running free, in your mind
moving across the desert, the sand
scorching the soles of your feet when
stillness reaches you.

You leap like kangaroo ready to
continue this journey, sprinting across
the baked sand, waiting for your prayer.
The sand is still baked, but you are still going
to continue your journey. Leaping
from rock to rock, gliding through the hot,
the boiling sun. You feel like a jacket potato baking but
not getting burnt. You won't give up. You will find
your way back, to your roots that have been ripped
from the soil. You threw yourself to the ground
and rolled twice. When you landed, you heard a thimble
as if you were worthless. You give up then
and start your journey all over again. Back home.

UNTITLED

by Toniianne

You could be possessed by demons,
wishing that you weren't here.
You could be running free
in your mind, moving across the desert.
You could be tired and worn out
from having the same relationship.
You could be crying, screaming for help
but no one hears.
You could be longing for days that have passed
hoping to change the here and now.
You could be protected by the shadow
of your mother, keeping you warm.
You could be wondering where your father has gone.
You could be locked in your mind with no way out.
You could be trying to fit into a world
you don't belong.
You could actually be happy
but tired.

UNTITLED

by Reanna

I would love to go back to mainstream,
do my revision for exams and get
good grades. I don't know about prison
'cause I haven't been there before. I will
have a future. I'm being positive.
I love sleeping, listening to music.

UNTITLED

by Reanna

Chris Brown is the best in the world
take me to America to see him
and I will love you forever, but
I won't pay you though as I
was saying I live in Peckham
and Saturday just gone
my good friend died of a
stab wound and I never
thought it was real
until his sister told me that they
went to identify his body and it
was him. Zone 2 #HitSquad baby
Moscow 17C (begs).
Rhianna, soon I will be leaving this school
to a mainstream to study and get good
GCSEs and get a job and be a nurse.
People can't stop swearing in this world,
it's funny and annoying. Some people can't tell the
truth. When I tell the truth, it hurts and people say
I'm rude.

UNTITLED

by Hayley

I want to be in mainstream. I hate being
here but I have to deal with it. I wish
I didn't fuck up
my chances at my old school. I wish
I could go back in time and change how
things turned out. I really do. But what can I do?
I sometimes feel like my mum
has given up on me. I feel as if she's fed up with
the way I am. But what she doesn't understand is
I'm trying

She doesn't understand that I'm trying my best
trying as hard as I can and I want to make her
proud. But her expectations are so high it's hard to
reach them

(Lovehearts in ascending size)

Music makes me happy. It makes me feel positive
and happy. It's a way I can release my feelings, be free.

HOPE IS

by Hiab

**My cat
my cousin's birthday
my dad
I don't know what to do
Harlem Spartan
Bed
Leaving school
music
running up the stairs
Eritrea
Not lying
My boyfriend's name
I am**

SELF PORTRAIT WITH HAIR

by Hiab

**Short, curly, tissue-soft
sounds like water dripping,
coconuts hanging
Tastes like Soothers – purple
packet, it dreams
of flowers**

UNTITLED

by Kelly

You're not God you can't judge me you're not bad you just act
tough you will get smacked if you act up

My bars are Antarctica you will freeze to death I spit straight
fire like lava gal get passed like zoot I'm on cloud 9 you haven't
got a clue

UNTITLED

by Ray

mum sleeping safe place
cold new year chinese winter snow house-bound
upset bullying grief heir horsefly
real plastic surgery friends robots
studio DJ Khaled Raydioactive beats my love for it dad
mirror ghosts seven years bad luck unlucky
soon bye new aeroplane opportunities lifts
loud quiet decibels screaming movement
spanish french barrier united nations
lies priest under oath professional
raynequa unique dorothy nelson beautiful unusual cute
grandma birth certificate registered official identity

UNWANTED

by Ray

In foster placements, filled without any care,
I guarantee that no one wants me there. Stay put
in my room, eating once for the day.
To be completely honest, this isn't the real Ray.

UGLY

by Ray

Told by so many there's nothing good about me,
so now when I look in the mirror, all I see
is a fat black girl with no aspirations
and when it comes to killing myself,
there have been multiple temptations.

UNWORTHY

by Ray

Sometimes I feel this world is too good to be on
Reasons why I shouldn't leave:

DEPRESSION

by Unnamed

Deep within the walls of my mind unable
to escape reaching out for help
that isn't there demons are
inside me telling me to go back
but I attempt to go forward

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

Be blue
I can see brown
his pupils, red
A monster I see
a human being
when he comes out
into the world

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

**It looked like paint writhing,
like the sky passing by,
blue smoke. There
it looked like life
but felt like E.T.**

SELF-PORTRAIT AS AN ACTRESS

by Unnamed

**As I prepare for the role I am about to
play, the real, true me has to be
put away.**

ALIENS

by Rebecca

Skin of the alien, eye
alien is blind -

The alien got stabbed
in the eye, that's why
he's blind.

Humans have brains,
aliens don't.

M dot 2 show key, when I'm sad
it makes me happy. When I'm happy,
it inspires me. Lord, why you take
my brothers?

If you gave your heart to me,
Lord, why my brothers? I'm feeling
pain nobody knows. My honey,
I'll wait for you to come. Tell me that
you want me. We can do more.

UNTITLED

by Rebecca

Prawns, give up. I'm motivated as a night of glitter
chasing dreams, Grandma slapping my leg. Why?
Hide 'n' seek singing, preach my sister, preach
God, Holy Communion, I give my heart
to broken, to Chris Brown, to song food, the Birthday Day Girl
sparkles under a swimming pool moon, crash beautiful
there in your big-shy diamonds, dress baby blue just by
seeing people. Ocean spaceship, I should have never
given up on you. Caged heart, we can see aliens finding Dory
handsome. We are never getting back together
can't you see, whiz kid, God's finest prayer.
What would it be like if you went inside a black hole?
What would happen, cute universe?

UNTITLED

by Rebecca

You could be suffering because you're black. You could be worried
you can't pay your rent.
You could be hungry because you haven't eaten – no bread or butter.
You could be dead inside, blood on black.
You could be forced to be happy because they told you to
put a smile on your face.
You could be invisible to the photographer even though you are
his subject.
You could be a slave
through his lens.
You could be gone – into the forest, into your background painted by
his hand.
You could be beautiful
because you are beautiful.
You could be tired from taking this picture
You could be forced to keep taking this picture.

UNTITLED

by Charlotte

Firework butterfly
the all-seeing eye
They can see
blurred vision
blue and brown

Go to bed. Sleep
all day. Watch TV
go back to sleep
I don't know what I'm doing
next.

I want to be a vet.
Someone who talks to lions
I will go to them.

I try to fit into this country.
There are not many black people
like me. I wear these people's clothes
and copy their hairstyles. I have been separated
from my family. I have a middle class background
I am lonely.

UNFORGET

by Charlotte

I cannot conform to a 9-5,
there has to be more to this life.

I try to make a living anyway. How
without selling my soul?

I want to live a gypsy life, travelling
free.

UNTITLED

by Shardonday

What can fall from the sky?
Weed, money, 22 inch weave. Nope.

She is all good but she's bad too.
She's an actress, she doesn't care
about anyone but herself.

The first face that comes to mind
is my husbands.

When the eyes are open, when I'm walking

when I'm talking, when I'm bored,
when I'm thinking.

UNTITLED

by Shardonnay

Don't know what that means
and I don't care what it means.
Young, she's still growing up.
I take a ride on the bus, the bash
crash. There were a lot of people
on that bus.
I've given up
on life, on people.
The bluest thing I've ever seen
is my room, the ocean in Jamaica,
some people's eyes.
There's no such thing as love,
it's just a word. I've lost
some of my family members
through dumb behaviour.
Say a prayer to God to better myself.
I should have an education
when I'm 21. I don't know
about silver light, sparks shining bright
wowing messy sparkles like two stars.

UNTITLED

by Shardonney

You could be physically sad from all the grief
You could be fed up of this life
You could be in prison, locked up for being
a coloured man.
You could be done
with people treating you like an animal
You could be my great-grandfather but I will never
know you.
You could be unhappy of the life you're living
as a slave – so many years.
You could be happy for winning
Coloured Champion of the World
You could be dead
for being black
You could struggling in poverty
You could be grateful
for every breath you take.

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

I have sadness in my eyes
because of my past.

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

I am tired inside and outside
but I look happy.

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

Thank you, Mama for the nine months you carried me,
for all the pain and the struggling.

Baby girl, whether you're bad or na, I love you,
when you miss me, I hope
you got a man or na. If you don't you can play
with me. One time for them bad gily bumper
go bum bum bum bum bum.

Leg over, my baby. Give me leg over
ah, and over, my baby, give me leg over

Do you remember me. No? I don't know where
where you when my mother hold me, I won.

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

What would you rather be doing
if you weren't taking this picture?
Do you like the clothes you are wearing?
What are you thinking?
Do you feel proud having your picture
taken?

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

You could be out in the sun
You could be having fun
You could be taking this photo for your _____
You could be that proud son
You could be sitting but you're standing tall
You could be rich, you could be poor, you could be
wanting to run out the door. You could be the one
who has it all.

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

I am beautiful. I love my headscarf,
I love my traditional outfit,
I am all about tradition.
I am forced to take the photograph,
this is why I am sad.

POTENTIAL

by Unnamed

**I know everything
is a mess right now,
but I have potential
to be great. I know
I'm going to grow
into somebody great.
Slowly by slowly, I am
getting there.**

BADDIE

by Unnamed

**I don't care what you think.
At the same time I do.
I'm a bad baddie
confident but insecure,
bold but unnoticed**

PRESSURE

by Unnamed

I feel the pressure, the pressure
to be perfect. The pressure to be
humble and calm. When your mind's a mess,
it's hard to focus. It's hard to keep
the thoughts intact. It's hard to be
honest about how you feel, you
don't know.

MISUNDERSTOOD

by Unnamed

No one knows how I feel. No one
knows what I go through. No one
knows what goes through me.
No one knows why I do the things I do.
No one knows I have a reason.
No one knows I don't do random. No one
but I know.

UNTITLED

by Unnamed

Beautiful to some. Beautiful to all. 100% pure beauty.
Insecure, secure and scared. Raw, untouched skin.
She brown-brown, she cute-darling, you could be
a spartan.
Chocolate-darling, brown-being-cute with no
make-up. Gorgeous-soft, deluxe.
She, hour-soft, knotted free.
Ugly to some. Beautiful to me.

Poetry by students at Phoenix Place, 2018

UNTITLED

by Reanna

When I was holding you, I thought you
were something dead and it felt
so soggy and nasty it made my hand
itchy. I can't stop itching,
jeez.

Well, trust it gave me butterflies.

UNTITLED

by Reanna

first pic

When I look at myself, I feel like I am
forced to smile but I try

second pic

But in the second one, I look so happy
I feel like feeling like that, honestly

MY NAME

AFTER SANDRA CISNEROS

by Reanna

I don't know why my mum called me Reanna
maybe because she wanted a famous name in the house
my name reminds me of something dark
like red black purple
and she had to name me after a singer
and people mock my name when I meet them
which is annoying
to be honest, yeah, I'm grateful for the name
she gave me because I could have had
a lot worse
I like my name because when my mum
shouts my name it's funny and I can't
stop laughing
I wouldn't like to be called Mary, Sara, Ann,
Samantha, Susan, Tiahanna,
the reason I don't say my middle name
is because I can't pronounce it properly

MY HAIR

by Noor

A dark flowing stream cut to shoulder length
raspberries and fruity sense

she wants her hair to look and feel
how she wants it that day

some days, soft as a subtle white cloud
or as dry as pieces of string
all clumped together
when her hair is alive, she is too

SUGGESTED VERSION

by Noor

I want to relive the past, escape
the future, appreciate everything I once had

I want to talk about my lost soul
buried in the pile of letters that sit
by the flaming fire

(and follow in the order already established)
(cut ellipses? Because line breaks do the same thing?)

UNTITLED

by Noor

I want to talk about my lost soul
buried in the pile of letters that sit
by the flaming fire

but I can't...

I don't want to talk about our old lost
love that we once had which has
turned into dead flakes of moist air

but I have to...

I want to fly free with my feathers
spread across my wings

I want to talk about our cherished memories
but the pain of your gentle laughter
is too strong to bare...

I want to relive the past, escape
the future to appreciate everything I had

UNTITLED

by Mica

fire burn pain heat dry light red orange tear skin hot sun
true force lies cheat hate traitor liar passion love trust humble
appreciate family

I am making a cake pie food drink dress baby change
skin cream black brown beautiful soft tough strength dry hot cold
light mixed blood red cells black disease power strength damage
I see trees bees grass blue stars baby Monday mum family love cars
I know all everything lust love hate
eyes black green brown hazel blue blind grey
my voice is powerful beautiful sing strong loud words lies truth corner
sofa toys dark paint
I feel weak last love needed hopeful tearful tired confident strong

UNTITLED

by Grace

Death, sorrow's daydreaming, drug's lighter,
smoking nothing, nothing nothing nothing
false lie's fake, not believable, dickhead's bullshit
laughing food hungry
touching movement colour feeling
shadow's in my room darkness trapping drugs
nothing nothing nothing – trapping netly's
mean's nothing
true colours
not sure, don't know
like dying, angry, mushable unhappy,
satisfied by nothing, lonely but
happy, devastated, paranoid
trapped, scared, claustrophobic

MY NAME

by Pav

Pallavi, a new flowering bud, the beginning of new life, a new chapter. That's what my name means. But to others, my name means their favourite dessert (pavlova), having a laugh (palaver) or their favourite opera singer (Pavarotti). All nicknames I've adopted along the way, but still not, Pallavi, the name I was given. I used to hate my name for this reason, the way everyone gave me a name that wasn't mine. But now, now I embrace it, because Pallavi is unique, rare, different, just like me. And if I had a different name, I wouldn't be me, it would be like giving someone Pepsi and saying it's Coke. both look the same but very different.

MY NAME OR PROFESSIONAL PORTRAIT

by Grace

I don't think another name would suit me.
Graceful means like an angel lol
I like my name. It suits me, Grace reminds
me of a rainbow.

Grace sounds like dancing.
Moving beautifully
across the floor

contemporary or ballet

my name reminds me of peace
and quiet loneliness.

I wouldn't change my name because it
wouldn't be right, but if my alter ego
had a name, I'd call her
reckless.

professional portrait

MY HAIR

by Reanna

Grandma used to scare me when I was young
I always cried when my mum left me
I got two colours in my hair
dead rose brown and honeycomb
I wanted to try it
to stand out, I want to
do jet black next.
Lashaun does my hair for me, a girl
in my year. I normally go to Peckham,
to a hairdressers to do it but
then I just asked her, do you do hair?
I was tired of going to the hairdressers.
They talk too much, shout too much,
see someone outside and shout,
do you want to do your hair?
I listen to them for an hour and a half,
two hours, depressed. It feels long.
Sometimes they buy me food. Last time
they bought me McDonald's.
In the end it's worth it. It's fresh, you
can see my clean, shiny scalp.
When I walk out, I feel happy, I relieved
can show my hair. I don't know if happiness has
a colour... I suppose happiness is honeycomb.
A light and dark brown mixed together.

My hair smells of coconut oil and happy
about writing maybe
I don't like smiling much. I feel like it's personal.
I'm smiling right now though, I can't help it,
I guess I might be happy, I don't know why.
I have my hair in all up Ghanaian braids
the most. Adding colours
to the circle.
It feels annoying, when it is too tight, when I sleep.

My mum used to slap my hands if I
touch my hair. I only wanted to see
how much I had left.

I would sit in between her legs, my bum hurting, sitting on the floor,
til my
hair's done, or until adverts or until I need the toilet.

I called mum from Grace's house,
to ask her whether I could dye my hair,
a little bit. She didn't ask what colour.
I didn't tell her. She said, yeah you can.

Other mums might have said, what
kind of question are you asking me? But she
just said, yeah you can. So I bleached it,
left it in. It began to change colour.

In the mirror, a dark brown honeycomb, lighter and lighter
sweeter and sweeter
my hair was the colour of crunchy nut cornflakes
without the crunch of nuts, I don't have no nuts in my hair

my perfect hair would be Rapunzel. I'd throw
my hair out my bedroom window not for anybody
just to see how far it could go.

MY SCARF

by Reanna

I feel like I forgot it somewhere.

My scarf is my new hair.

Unless my hair is fresh-fresh, I have to wear it.

My mum and my friends get angry about it.

They want me to show and not hide it.

I like my hair hidden
my own secret for me

TWO SIDES

by Toniianne

one side is hyper joyful helpful happy
eats a lot. Go on Instagram, go on snap
chat.

other side, is rude, quite, if I want to be
don't want to eat, tired, get annoyed, easily,
hate school, hate life, be rude to every
body for no reason

MY NAME

by Toniianne

I am annoying
why would you
have me if
you are going
to complain.
I hate my name
so so so
much if I could
change it I would
change it to Momtana

I was named
because my mum
and her mum were
arguing about my name
my mum wanted to call
me angel and my nan
to call me heaven but then
my nan said keep anne in the
family so then my dad's last name
is Toni so my mum called me
Toniianne.

Toniianne, angel hill.

FREWRITE

by Toniianne

I was so I thought it was
scared

a pigeon

I was crying

I didn't touch it I was scared

how can I cry over
a feather

I didn't hear anything

I can't believe I cried I didn't taste it
no way

I'm a baby lol I cried
I'm jokes

I'm a scaredy cat
I am a scaredy cat

I thought that if I moved
it would peck me or
do something to me
so I didn't do
anything

I was just
cold

it reminded me
of a heavy feather

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Royal African Society