Seattle Arts & Lectures
Interview Transcript: Matt Gano & Aaron Counts,
Co-Founders of Seattle Youth Poet Laureate Program
Interviewer: Gabriela Denise Frank
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Note: this transcript has been edited for clarity and flow.

Gabriela Denise Frank
I'm Gabriela Denise Frank, and I'm here on behalf of Seattle Arts & Lectures with Matt Gano and Aaron Counts, Seattle poets and co-founders of the Seattle Youth Poet Laureate (YPL) program. Thank you for being here with me this afternoon.

Aaron Counts
Hey, thanks for having us.

GDF
Yeah, I'm really excited to talk to with you. I just met Bitaniya Giday who is the current Youth Poet Laureate for 2020 and 2021. We had a wonderful conversation a few weeks ago.

Matt Gano
Fantastic.

GDF
So, to set the stage, tell me how this program began. What is it, and how did you come to start it?

MG
So, here's what happened. We were at a poetry reading for Roberto Ascalon at the Massive Monkees Studio. Roberto had a feature of a series of poems that he was working on, and he had a feature set up there, and a mutual friend of ours, Christa Bell—who's also a phenomenal poet and playwright and all-around incredible artist—approached me and mentioned that Michael Cirelli, who was one of the founders of Urban Word—which is the New York Youth Speaks chapter—was starting a Youth Poet Laureate program across the country and looking for pilot cities to start this program to partner with Urban Word. I don't know exactly who was using Urban Word as a framework for the YPL, but he was looking for partner cities, satellite cities, and Aaron and I were both at the party.

Christa mentioned this to me on the side, and I was, like, "Yeah, we should do that." Aaron was walking by and I was, like, "AC, we should do this," and he was, like, "Yeah, sounds good!" So that was pretty much the seed that was planted. Aaron and I both had connections with Michael Cirelli from Youth Speaks. Aaron was one of the founders of the Youth Speaks Seattle chapter back in the early 2000s, and I hopped on in 2004, I believe, which was a year or two after they started Youth Speaks Seattle. So we were early mentors and, you know, program directors and founders of Youth Speaks, and we had that connection with Michael Cirelli from New York through Brave New Voices, the national youth poetry slam gatherings. So, Christa put us in touch with Mike, and we just kind of started from there.

He let us know kind of what his vision was and what they were hoping to be able to do. Aaron and I, you know, part of the task was finding an umbrella organization. It was something way beyond what we can do ourselves, so we reached out to a couple different arts organizations in the city, people that we knew, we both worked for many of them in the city, and then eventually landed with Writers in the Schools (WITS). Jeanine Walker was the director at the time, and a good friend of both of ours. Those cohorts get pretty tight after a while—you work with the same teaching artists in the same circles for a really long time. Jeanine was in a position to lobby for us to Ruth and talk up the program, and it seemed like a really natural and amazing fit for Seattle Arts & Lectures to take on the Youth Poet Laureate program.

That's basically the origin story. We can go into more the details from there, but that's how it really started. Aaron, do you have any other...?

AC
Yeah, I mean, the network of organizations that converge at Brave New Voices each year, you know, we saw how that event lifted up the spoken-word artists, teenage spoken-word artists, and we were looking for a way to highlight and showcase and amplify those page-based poets in the same way. And, so, it was just a great idea, and it fit right in line with what Writers in the Schools is trying to do. I think it was the right move at the right time.

GDF
That was about seven years ago, or so?

AC
This is our seventh. Yeah. This is our seventh Laureate, so yeah. That seems so long ago now.

MG
That's crazy. It's been seven years. It does not feel that long.

GDF
And you've handed over leadership, is that right? This year?

AC
Yeah. We never intended to be the perpetual mentors of the Laureate. There are so many great teaching artists and writers in the city, and so we wanted to share the wealth and what other voices get to help bring to the program and how to lift up the manuscripts of the winner into this amazing book. It's a little bittersweet, but I think it was the right move.

GDF
Yeah. I have questions about where the program started and if it's the same today. When someone joins the cohort, what does the program look like? It runs for about a year, starting in the fall, then concluding in the spring or early summer. What does the cohort do together?

AC

Yeah, so, usually the applications for YPL come out in March and April, around Poetry Month, with the idea that the panel will deliberate, choose the winner, and that winner is usually announced at Northwest Folklife Festival over Memorial Day weekend. The first year of the program, we didn't have an idea that it would be a winner and a cohort, but seeing the finalists and the strength of all those applications and the multitude of voices, it felt like the right thing to do to try to not only support the winner, but also extend the reach of the program and the voices of the young people. Every year, it's about eight finalists—the YPL winner, an ambassador or two which also take on some speaking and teaching duties around the city, and then the cohort of finalists, trying to build a community, so they can support each other beyond the one-year term of the program.

MG
Yeah, just to mention, too, when we started, there was no plan, like Aaron said, for a cohort or an ambassador. Part of our ability to do that [came from the] freedom [we were given] within the structure to create this program the way that we wanted to. So, actually, the New York version of Youth Poet Laureate is much different than what we're doing. Different cities have different focuses, like some of the winners are chosen actually live, in-person, sort of in poetry slam style, but most of the decisions we made for this program were based around the content of the writing itself and to promote the voices of writers who were not necessarily in the spoken word realm, because we felt, like, Youth Speaks was handling that realm strongly already.

Having that freedom, we structured our contest to be judged by a panel, and then the winners will be announced live, in-person at Folk Life. But we weren't giving them the heads-up that they'd won. It was more about having the winner pre-determined so that the reading at Folk Life wasn't a contest in itself, it's more of a celebration of the artwork. So that's an interesting thing to note. We both felt that was a pretty cool setup that we were able to change things how we wanted them to be. I think it's one of the things that's allowed for this program to feel at home in Seattle and feel like it's doing the work that this community needs for it to do in its little niche.

AC
That process also allows such a deep discussion of the applicants and their writing, as opposed to, you know, we have half a minute or so after a performance to give it a score. We spend hours and hours reading applications and the panel sits and debates and just talks about all the great things going on. Sometimes it's very difficult decision, but I would not want to make that on the fly at a live event.

GDF
No, no. I can imagine. So, this is open to anyone who lives in the greater Seattle area?

MG
It is. The catch is that they have to be able to attend events in the city and in the area. So it's actually technically open to anyone. We've kind of expanded it to be outside of the city limits as well. We've had a few people from Bellingham apply, but one of the requirements is that the Youth Poet Laureate be present at events and be able to maintain that title in person within the city and surrounding areas. So, yeah.

AC
Yes, a lot of speaking requests, most of them happen in the city or just outside the city. I think Wei-Wei [Lee, the 2019/2020 Youth Poet Laureate] did a reading that opened up one of Mayor Durkin's press conferences a few months ago, you know, things like that. Those events usually happen in the city. So as long as they're nearby and travel well.

GDF
That makes sense. Bitanyia was mentioning to me that she was very excited to work more on the page. That was a goal for her. She has done quite a bit of slam up until this point. I'm curious, how do you work with the cohort? Is it a series of workshops and performances that are kind of sprinkled throughout the year? How does the program actually break down in practice?

AC
Usually early some time in the summer, we set a calendar for the year of a series of workshops. For a few years, we did sort of a writing-revising-publishing series, and tried to build those steps towards becoming a published author for the cohort. Meanwhile, a lot of one-on-one, coaching and mentoring and editing with the YPL winner because, you know, they have to go from an application of five poems to a full manuscript. A lot of the work is one-on-one with them or two-on-one as the case may be with two mentors. Then, the cohort has a separate workshop series that we try to lift up through a series of readings as well.

MG
Yeah. The intention is for the cohort and the ambassador to have some autonomy and kind of build their own [program]—what they would like to do throughout the year as a cohort. So a lot of what we've done over the years is intended to move the power of the program towards them having autonomy. We, as mentors, have maintained a structure for the Youth Poet Laureate themselves, but part of the idea of having the ambassadors was about giving them some leadership and giving them some drive over what function a cohort [provides], and we work in support of that. That's ideally what we aim for.

GDF
Was a book always part of the program? Bitaniya was very excited about that. It made me smile when she said, "Do you know how hard it is to you know, get a book deal?" and I said, "Yeah!"

AC
Yeah, that was the most exciting thing about the program in the first couple years. Urban Word, who founded the program in New York, already had a relationship with a small press. Eventually, very quickly, the program grew bigger than that press, and so, you know, now we have the great connection with *Poetry Northwest* here locally, to give a little bit more flexibility with timelines and deadlines. Also we want to, you know, keep it Northwest.

GDF
Sure. Why do you think it's important to engage in poetry with youth?

MG

Ah, it's a big question. I can offer a few insights, I suppose. You know, poetry offers a platform and a vehicle for social change. It offers a place for you to find community and connection, especially for kids who are, I think, experiencing the world through the types of feelings and ideas that lead them to poetry. Beyond the artistic aspects, or those social aspects, it's in the realm of critical thinking and uplifting voices that are often overlooked or unheard. These are sort of the basic principles that I always step to and carry with me when we're talking about uplifting youth voices and working with youth in the realm of poetry. Aaron?

AC
Yeah, I mean, art is a great way to explore the world, and poetry, I think, especially lends itself to sharpening your insight, because of the brevity. Some of the [qualities of] a great poem help you sharpen your focus and understand yourself and how you fit into the world. It's almost like having the recipe for oxygen—it's a survival skill. Just figuring out how you fit into the world and the bravery that I see in young people and just saying, you know, *This is the way I see the world* and saying it in front of hundreds of people on a stage or, hopefully, hundreds or thousands of people on the page—it lives forever there, and that's just such an incredible act of bravery. And we want to, you know, honor those ideas in those voices. Yeah.

MG
Yeah, and I'll add to that. You know, it is an incredible act of bravery, and that's something that we've seen a long, long time through Youth Speaks. It's something we felt, like, what we have to offer in terms of craft is to continue to elevate that in its quality. So, this program offers focused mentorship, which, a lot of these young writers are not getting focused mentorship in programs like Youth Speaks. Youth Speaks is sort of collecting people coming from different places who don't necessarily have the opportunity to work with someone closely to elevate the craft of what they're saying. This program was built around that opportunity and creating a community—a cohort or a salon of poets that are working in the realm of craft. It's a next step if you're considering yourself a serious writer, to seek mentorship, and it's something that we felt was necessary and was missing in terms of an organized place in the youth writing community in Seattle, in some ways. I mean, there are other places that are doing this like Hugo House and, you know, other places where kids have access, but often that is paid access in a different format. So that was definitely something that's been behind the motivation of this program.

AC
And to be able to do that over a whole year of working with someone, to be able to understand them in their writing, and figure out what the writing is trying to be and helping it get there. As opposed to, you know, a twelve-week, once-a-week class or something like that. [In YPL] you develop a stronger relationship. You can understand the poet and their poetry even better. Like Matt was saying, passing on those tools that can help this—I mean, I don't want to call them a diamond in the rough, they're just a diamond. It's like, what if the diamond had the tools to sharpen and polish itself? That's the way we approach mentorship.

GDF
Are there memories that you would want to share? Like, you know, I don't want to say someone overcoming something, but moments where you saw someone figure something out for themselves, and it really kind of clicked for them through the year?

MG
Something like that happens every year. But yeah, we've got highlights.

AC
Yeah, I was gonna say that same thing. Every year, I feel like there's a moment where Matt and I look at each other and go, *Oh crap, wow, what just happened, right?* I think these six writers that we've worked with, each of them really worked hard at that manuscript but also worked hard at you know, *themselves*, and absorbing all of this feedback. And Matt and I don't always agree, which I think also makes the program strong. To hear an opinion from two different writers, two different readers, and two different listeners of your work. But, yeah, each year, I think there's that moment where we're like, *Who wrote this?* Like, *Where did this come from?* Because it's such a break. And it's, like, yeah, some time during that year, a switch is flipped, and all of a sudden, all this amazing stuff happens.

MG
I was gonna say we've been really fortunate that each one of these people that we've selected—and I think it probably just comes with the territory, if you're putting yourself in a position to win a position like this, that you would be serious about what you're doing—but these people, these young people that we've worked with all see themselves as serious writers and have stepped to the task and stepped to the challenges that Aaron and I have put down for them.

It's kind of hard to just pinpoint a single moment without outing anyone or, you know—those are sort of private moments in a way, because they're very vulnerable and there are these shifts that happen. But what I will say is, every year, when the book starts taking shape, something that Aaron and I have them do is print out all the poems towards the end, and then—we've had access to a big whiteboard before—and it becomes this giant bubble map of all these different titles, and we start thinking about the structure of the book. It's pretty much after that session, we can just sit back and look at that board and be, like, "This is your book." This is it. That's kind of a chills moment for everybody, and just really exciting to see the progression of the work itself, and where they've each started. Because there has been sort of a rawness involved with each of the poets that we've selected, and then to see that work refined over time, and also see these monumental leaps in voice and in craft over, you know, six months or whatever, is so exciting. Really, I think that's one thing that Aaron and I, where we find the joy in this program the most and those moments, because you see it pay off, and you see the pride and the excitement, and also like the nervousness about, *Oh shit, I have a book now*—which is fun, too.

GDF
That's got to hit you right here.

MG
Right?

AC
It does. You know, I was thinking as Matt was talking about those moments and, I think, without fail, each of the six past winners—I mean, all of us as poets—it's the cutting of things that

you've worked so hard on [that's] really difficult. And, sometimes, you're throwing out entire poems, or big sections and chunks of poems, but in that process, for each of them, there has been a time and all of a sudden, they just start crossing things out. I hate that act of destruction, but also it's something to love in that they're seeing what's great about their writing, and they're not afraid that they don't have another—they don't have more poems or more lines in them. It's, like, okay to get rid of this because I'm going to create some even greater stuff. Those moments are the among the most powerful, I think.

MG
No doubt, absolutely.

GDF
Do you see a difference in how young people take to poetry, as opposed to adults?

AC
Yeah. Well, do I? Yeah, no, maybe not. I mean, there's such a diversity, I'm thinking about classroom experiences. Also, I think there's a difference in the way self-identified writers take the poetry. And so the work that Matt and I—I don't [want] to speak for Matt—the work that I have done in classrooms, where you have a full classroom of thirty, and maybe one or two of them consider themselves a poet, is very different than the work of, you know, working with the Youth Poet Laureate and the finalist cohort. There's just a different level of a seriousness and urgency. I feel like young people understand inherently better the muscle that poetry can wield. And maybe it's because we encourage that form of poetry in young writers more. But yeah, there's a different level of ferocity, I guess, percentage-wise, for young writers.

MG
Yeah, I think sometimes... Hm. How to frame this. Maybe your exposure to poetry as an adult writer sometimes inhibits the freedom of your voice. Whereas some of the younger writers that we're working with just don't have as much of a broad exposure to what's been said. So they're not afraid to say it, and they're not even actually aware that they're saying something that has been said already many times, but they're doing it in a unique way. And so maybe that, psychologically, is playing into some of the exciting things that we're encountering with youth writers. Anyway, that's just a theory of mine, but I think that is some of it.

GDF
I mean, it's a personal curiosity. And I've asked this question of many writers now, and I've talked to Bitaniya, and I have my own experiences in school where poetry for us was really read. I mean read from a book, not necessarily out loud, and I know I dated myself when I talked with Arianne True, and I mentioned that most of the people that we read when I was in school were all dead. We didn't read living writers and I think that it seems to me like young people's relationship with poetry is so different today because of programs like this. You know, the fact that poetry slam is a thing, and then when people start to remind you, oh, yes, poetry is meant to be *heard*. It's a different take that has happened, it seems like, over the last few generations. It feels really exciting to me.

AC

Yeah, I think poetry for young readers and writers now, it is very much more accessible than when we were young, you know, we had to, like, dust off those books and leaf through it. I mean, there were folks doing it; we just didn't hear them often, and especially not in school. I mean, we couldn't roll in—you know, we gotta roll in the cart with the VHS on the bottom—you're not getting anything live from YouTube in your classroom. So yeah, a lot of dusty old tomes.

MG
Yeah, we had hip-hop. So there was poetry but it wasn't necessarily being recognized as spoken word. For me, that was my connection. But there wasn't academic or, like, here's what poetry can be outside of music. So, yeah, it is interesting. I mean, I was never excited by any poetry in my teenage years other than, you know, until I discovered Saul Williams. But that was, you know, I was already, like, eighteen or nineteen by the time he was really becoming famous. And, so, that was the spark for me. But yeah, I mean, yeah—like Aaron said.

GDF
I do want to ask you both about how you got your start as poets, but maybe before we shift to that, I'm curious how seven years of this program has changed you both as writers and as humans.

AC
I just get more and more amazed every year. I mean, just the depth of love for the written and spoken word that I see in young people. It's inspiring to me and, also, I think mentoring someone on a full year-long process to develop a book really makes me have to understand what I do as a writer, and why I'm doing it as a writer, in order to be able to convey that. It's really sharpened my eye and my ear as an editor which, then, you know, makes me a better writer.

MG
Yeah, I would second that. That's really been the most notable thing, I suppose, for myself as well. Aaron and I have been collaborating and working together for a really long time. Aaron's always been a mentor to me and was, when I first started as a teaching artist, one of the people that I looked to for advice. We've had a really long connection, like since what, 2003? Now, like, seventeen years of working together.

Within the process, also learning how to work together to build something, and to mentor and teach together, having co-collaborative teaching, this is, you know, a teaching position. To have a co-collaborative relationship around teaching, I think is a privilege and a huge honor. And it's one of the things that I cherish the most about this program, that Aaron and I get to hang out and be in a space together and talk about these things that we're both really excited about, and, you know, see the results of all of these discussions in a book form at the end, has always been amazing. In terms of development as a teacher, in addition to what Aaron was saying, as a writer and as an editor, having that lens focused and sharpened, but also in the realm of a collaborator and just knowing how to play off of each other and build the things that we're teaching in those moments in really constructive ways. It's been a huge joy.

AC

It really has. Matt and I talked a lot about—we sort of liken it to a medieval guild, you know—we're just plying our craft and passing it along to whomever wants to learn it, too. It really has been great. We do a lot of this work in isolation as writers, unless you have a really good writing circle or writing group. But, yeah, to be able to bounce ideas off of each other for all of these books that are not our own, and then talk about our own projects and just have that time to stay connected around the creation of words and ideas. It's just really been amazing.

GDF
So, Aaron, I love this line in your bio, *His first publication, however, was on his mother's old Kenmore refrigerator on Seventh Street in Yakima, Washington*. It tickled me in a couple of different ways. One was this idea of encouragement and the fact that you, as a young person, you would make something that your parents would be like, "Yeah, put that on the refrigerator." But also this way of just claiming, "Yes, I made this. I'm someone who made this thing that is here." Did you always know you were going to be a poet, or that you *were* a poet?

AC
No, no—not at all. I have a roundabout way that I came to be a writer. I used to be an adolescent counselor and gang intervention person, and ran an education center—a high school re-entry program in West Seattle, and every summer, we threw out the traditional curriculum and did personal essays and poetry as a curriculum, and we published it in a chapbook. I would write along with the students, and, you know, summer after summer of telling them, *You got to tell your story, you got to tell your story, here's how we do it.* You know, it just sort of stuck. When I left that job, I went to work on writing projects full-time and then started as a teaching artist and never looked back. So, I got started as a poet because of young people. I think that's why I continue to try to make that connection.

GDF
That's beautiful. I think poets actually make the best essayists, in my opinion, and I say this as an essayist who occasionally tries to be a poet, but I think it's hard going that way. There's such a focus on language in poetry that I think really translates well into prose.

AC
Well, if you need a mentor!

GDF
Yes, please! [Laughs.] Matt, tell us about music. Tell us about your relationship to music and its relationship to your work.

MG
Yeah. Um, so, I fell in love with poetry listening to hip-hop in the nineties—in the mid/late nineties. Mostly, I think, the transience and liquidity of language through a hip-hop group called Hieroglyphics from the West Coast. But they were all so advanced lyrically, just something I'd never heard before. That sort of influenced me. I was growing up in Kennewick and, you know, there wasn't a hip-hop culture or anything, but my friends and I were really into that. We started kind of freestyling and rapping and I fell in love with the music of language.

Before that, I think my first connection to the music of language came from Shel Silverstein and my dad reading us those poems. My dad would read us those poems nightly before bed growing up, in addition to the old—super old—Mother Goose stories. He would recite us Shel Silverstein, he would read some of those with us before bed as a kid, and I didn't have this epiphany of the connection to language 'til I was probably in my mid-twenties or so. That's sort where it was sparked from. So, the music of language and, sort of, the what's possible within rhyme and sound in language, I think was sparked that way, but was really fanned by hip-hop and by that connection of lyricism from the sort of early, mid-nineties. Then that drew me to spoken word. I didn't have beats to rap to, so at eighteen, nineteen, I started writing these really long, lyrical poems that I would recite, and I didn't even realize that there was a thing called poetry slam happening. That sort of started around '98 or '99, which was when I was about eighteen. That's around when I discovered Saul Williams, he had a book called *She* that came out, and he had a CD along with the book of him reading the poems, and also his performance in the movie *Slam*. His poem "Sha-Clack-Clack" was really the one that like, I was like, *Oh, crap, like there's a whole genre of people doing this sort of lyrical poetry thing—that's what I want to do*. So, I graduated, then I was getting my AA at a community college in Pasco called Columbia Basin College, then I moved to Bellingham in search of poetry, open mics and mentorship, and found a lot of that and then—that's sort of the beginning of everything.

GDF
What are you reading now, or listening to now? That was another question: spoken versus written. Do you love them both?

MG
Oh, yeah, absolutely. My approach to writing has always been on the craft side. I went to Bellingham thinking that I was this awesome, lyrical performance poet and then ended up taking all these creative writing classes and began to understand the craft side, which is what I wanted. That was the mentorship I needed. I had a professor there, James Bertolino, who was from the era of the Beat poets. He was periphery to the second wave of Beat poets and he'd been around the block and seen everything, but his focus on craft was really drilled into me as a writer. I think it's a balance. I've sort of always been prided myself or attempted to be like, sort of 360 with the art form, you know. I think, if you're going to call yourself an artist in a particular genre, I want to be able to participate anywhere that art form is taking place. So whether that's a page-oriented reading or a poetry slam or, you know, a freestyle cypher, that's always been my aim. That's always been my goal. For my art.

AC
I haven't been reading much poetry during this summer. I've been reading a lot of fiction and listening to a lot of—my daughter is thirteen and she's musical theater nut—and so we've been dissecting different musical theater performances. So, that's been my summer: musical theater and any new hip-hop.

Luckily enough, at Creative Justice, I get to work with a lot of great artists. We have longtime local hip-hop legend, Jace from Black Stax working with us now. So, I've been listening to his music. Also, in the spirit of passing on these skills, we have a group of pyramids or artists, so they're age eighteen to twenty-one, and they're learning from Jace and from the rest of the team,

how to be a teaching artist. All three of them are up-and-coming hip-hop artists, and so I've been listening to a lot of the beautiful folks that I work with, in addition to the musical theater.

MG
Yeah, I guess I didn't quite answer the question. I kind of went around it but.

GDF
It was a big question.

MG
It was a big question. I've been reading Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. I just picked that back up. I kind of was reading it in between things and put it down and then reading it again. Which is a fantastic book. Do you know—are you familiar with that book, Gabriela?

GDF
Oh, yeah. Yeah!

MG
Yeah. *Bluets* is amazing. And, also, I've been really interested in Clarice Lispector, who's probably my favorite writer right now. I mean, she's obviously long-dead, but my favorite recently discovered writer. And Bob Kaufman's collection of poetry that was released recently. A lot of his work was overlooked, and he never really had any major publications until this large collection that was published, that sort of resurfaced him in the lens of great American writers. So, those are what I've been reading. I honestly don't read. I'm kind of like Aaron, I don't read a lot of—did you say you don't read a lot of poetry?

AC
I mean, I do [but] I haven't the last few months. I did revisit Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* because, when I read it the first time—I had a friend several years ago, whatever year that book came out, [who] had a heart transplant, and he was unconscious in the bed and I read it aloud to him—but I didn't really experience it in a way I wanted to. So, I revisited that this summer. Terrence Hayes. I guess I'm looking at poets who are doing non-traditional things with the text of their poems. Those are the poets that I'm reading. And then, yeah, musical theater. Oh, Fantastic Negrito if you're into blues, American roots music. He's out of Oakland and he's making some really cool blues music right now. That's been keeping me sane during the quarantine.

GDF
Well, I saw that Brave New Voices just happened. That just got onto my radar, and I might be late to the party, but the Slow Down is now a place I go to to listen to poetry. Are there any poetry slams, readings, or any programs that people might want to discover that you've been enjoying now that we can't go out anymore?

AC
I'm sure there are. I don't know them. I mean, I wish I knew. I'm sure there's some great poetry podcasts or you know, those kinds of things, but I'm just not tuned in that way. You should ask Bitaniya and Wei-Wei. The YPL winners, they probably know better than Matt or I.

GDF
The Poet Salon locally is another one that Gabrielle Bates and Luther [Hughes] and—I'm totally blanking on the third host's name—

MG
Dujie [Tahat].

GDF
Dujie! Thank you. Yes.

AC
Bringing it back around to the beginning, Dujie was a Youth Speaks participant as a college student, I guess, he was a freshman at Washington State University at the time—somewhere in Eastern Washington.

MG
Something like that.

AC
Whitman [College].

MG
Whitman, that's what it was. I'll mention one. Buddy Wakefield's doing a huge online poetry festival all summer called Awful Good Writers. And he's collected pretty much all of the heaviest hitters in spoken word and poetry slam over the last over the years on this lineup, and they're offering Zoom workshops and live performances all summer. I haven't checked it out yet, but that's that's probably the biggest current thing spoken word-wise that that one could consume right now.

GDF
I love it. I'm gonna check that out. And then I can link to it when we do the transcript. What's next for you both? Do you have projects that are in the works? What's happening next?

MG
Well, so, my art has shifted into making music, so even though my writing was born of hip-hop, it was something that I didn't really move towards. I found success as a spoken word poet and as a slam poet early. And, so, that's sort of the direction that I took my work. In 2004 to 2008, I was on several national slam teams and was working in that realm. I back-seated the desire to rap and do music. And, then, after my time in the slam, I was repositioning what I was doing with writing and kind of really focused deep into these small, short poems that were really craft-oriented and page-oriented. My focus went into the realm of page poetry, and then I kind of exhausted that and then had an opportunity to begin making music again.

I worked on a project with my friend, Chris Carroll, in late 2010, or I guess it was 2007 to 2009 called the Gold Fronts. And, that project, we recorded but [it] never really took traction. We

never really performed. But, then, we reconnected a few years ago, and I started working on a project called *Entendres*. So, most of my art is happening now in the realm of lyrical hip-hop, alternative hip-hop, I suppose. So it's poetically framed, lyrical, hip-hop, over lo-fi type of beats. So that's where my music is now. I just finished writing a new album, in April/May, and I'm kind of not sure how I'm going to get it recorded or where that's gonna happen, when that's gonna happen. So that something I'm sitting on now. But I released a small, three-track EP in February called the *Generations EP*. So there's three songs on Spotify and all platforms under the title *Entendres*. So that's where my work is. And that's what most of my creative writing energy has gone towards in the last several months. Yeah—and I've been doing a lot of journaling around life during the pandemic and stuff, too. Like I was saying, I try to keep my writing life living in different realms because they call for different forms of expression and different feelings, I think. Yeah, that's where I'm at. What about you, AC?

AC
Yeah, I have been spending a lot of time and energy working with Creative Justice, which is my main job. But luckily, it involves arts, and so I haven't been doing a lot of writing, sadly, but I've been doing a lot of visual art, some painting and some conceptual stuff as we try out new things that we might want to implement in the program. I take them home and and keep working on it, so I have a lot of visual art that's been going on in the past the past few months. I'm looking forward to taking some time off whenever life gets back to normal and really focusing on digging into another manuscript. Crossing fingers for January.

GDF
Is that when everything's gonna go back to normal? [Laughs]

AC
Not normal, but normal enough that I can feel like I can step aside from the day job and focus on creating.

GDF
I want to know when normal comes back.

MG
It's either gonna be, like, some positive direction towards normalcy or complete chaos and destruction.

GDF
Well, let's end on what has you feeling hopeful—or excited or happy these days?

MG
Nothing. I'm just kidding.

GDF
There's gotta be something in the food department. Right?

AC

Yeah, you know, the good thing about having so much work-from-home time means I'm at the office today but I do a lot of take a lot of calls and meetings from my backyard. And we've been working really hard on creating, you know—like two years ago, it was just overrun with blackberries—and we started a garden last year and it's sort of expanding. Just being able to sit down amongst food that you're growing and then, when you're done working, pick it and go in the house in and eat it. Like, that's bringing me a lot of joy.

GDF
Me too.

MG
Yeah, I would echo that same experience. My partner and I were able to move into a new place out of Capitol Hill. We live in [the] Ravenna area now and, you know, the place came with a yard that had an old broken-down garden box that no one had tended to, and we've completely flipped the yard and, so, you have a flower garden and all these tomatoes we planted and everything. It's really rewarding. So, you know, there's hope that like, quality still grows, you know, so. I don't know. Yeah, I would echo Aaron's sentiment on that.

GDF
It's been such a pleasure to talk with both of you. I'm excited to just see where things go for you guys, but also with the YPL program. I mean, what an amazing program.

AC
Yeah, I'm really excited to see Bitaniya's book come out in the spring, but it'll be a total surprise to me. So I get to experience it the way the rest of the world does, which is gonna be great.

MG
I'm hoping for that too.

GDF
She is an amazing person. I have to say, I was blown away by her.

MG
Yeah, it's been fantastic. Thank you, Gabriela.