WRITERS MOSAIC

SuAndi

In Conversation with Michael McMillan

Michael McMillan (MM): I'm sitting here in SuAndi's lounge in her home in Manchester. Hello, SuAndi.

SuAndi (SA): Hiya.

MM: Nice to be with you. How would you describe yourself, SuAndi? How would you define yourself?

SA: By my cultural identity, I've always described myself as a black woman of mixed-race heritage. And the only reason I've got the mixed-race heritage in is because you can't see my mum. So, my mum was from Liverpool. So, I'm a Liverpool daughter and I'm a Nigerian daughter. And some days I think, *oh my God! I'm so Nigerian!* [Laughs]

MM: And other days, you're so Irish.

SA: Well, I'm just from Manchester, you know, simple as that. But definitely the Nigerian is there. It comes, it creeps from behind sort of thing. But the stroppiness, that some people like to refer to me, is from my mother. It's that scouse Irish, that fighting spirit that comes out of the Liverpool and the Irish connection definitely. Because my dad comes from that generation, you know, arriving before the *Windrush*, keeping his head down, getting by and not as like people coming from the Caribbean, hoping to go home; and just hoping to settle somewhere. You know, when it wasn't necessary, he came to go back. He was intransient wherever he landed. He was going to stay, so to speak. Does that make sense? Yeah. So that's my cultural I.D., darling.

MM: So, out of those two strong cultures and strong personalities, your father and your mother, how did that kind of shape you in terms of your practice as a poet? Or, did it?

SA: Well, growing up, I didn't know anything about the oral tradition coming out of Africa, obviously, because I'm a kid. But the telling of stories definitely come from my mother's side, and my mum and my auntie, Josie, and those women, nearly all white

women, supporting each other, talking about each other: about each other's marriages, relationships, how they raise their kids, all that kind of thing. And because I don't have any grandparents on either side, I was very reliant on learning our family history through those stories. So, my mum was raised in an orphanage. She was much later a 'Magdalena Sister', with my brother; lived an atrocious childhood under the nuns. And we listened in; we listened in. My dad rarely spoke about her.

MM: Do you think that oral tradition—I mean it, I mean did it—how did it impact you? Were you a kind of a performance poet before you were a poet, or how did that work, I mean?

SA: Well, I should be embarrassed really to say how I came into the arts. I loved poetry at school: *Ode to a Nightingale*. I didn't particularly like the context of it, but I liked poetry at school. I became a poet when I was asked to put a fashion show together for the Black Writers Group, that Lemn was leading. And, and the women who, later, we formed Blackscribe as part of that to put a fashion show together, which we did in the local West Indian sports and social club. And afterwards, I watched them get paid: their bus fare. That was what they got paid. They were launching a book, which was pieces of A4 stapled together, but they got paid for

talking. And I thought, *oh, I could do that*, you know. And I landed at Commonword as the Black Women Writers Development worker. That was the job title.

I didn't know anything about it, you know. I had started a family history. My mum had died, and I decided that if I ever had kids, I want my children to know something about the family background. So, I started writing this life story, I suppose. And then someone had suggested that I sell it to publishers. I sent the only copy I had to publishers. Fortunately, I got it back. They said there wasn't enough racism in it.

MM: [Laughs]

SA: Um, you know, but when I, when I joined Culture Word, there was a change at the time. And I'm thinking it probably was the start of Channel 4; they were doing revolutionary programmes. So, there was a thing on Black Art: Lubaina Himid, Maud Sulter was in it. And whoever put this job description together, talked about writing, fusing with different art forms.

So, it was *perfect* timing for me. What I didn't know was being given to me, informed me, from different directions. So, I did that for a while and then there was a performance coming up. I said, 'I wouldn't mind performing.' And very stupidly, I did my very first performance, with my very first role as emcee. Lemn and I were emcee.

MM: Lemn Sissay?

SA: Yeah. Lemn Sissay and I, I was always going to read as well. And it was the *big* people were coming: Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Grace Nichols, John Agard. They were coming from London. I can remember saying to Jean, 'How do you want to be introduced?' Because I've heard people call her 'Breeze' and she said, 'Jean 'Binta' Breeze', you know.

MM: [Laughs]

SA: I didn't know what John Agard looked like. I know, it was a community centre with red, grey seating and I couldn't find him. So, I decided he walked out. And I said, 'Well, I'm very sorry, ladies and gentlemen, it seems that the next poet has left and/or hasn't arrived.' And John came out of the back of the theatre performing because that was his style, you know. And I went, 'Oh, no, sorry. He's turned up!'

MM: And, so I read. And the only thing I knew was that I didn't want to explain the piece. I didn't want that. The next poem is about [mumbles] and I think the poem speaks for itself. But it can't do; you've just done 15 minutes' introduction of it. I also didn't want to hold the paper in front of my face. So, I asked for a music stand on

the side and I asked for a stool, because I can't stand when people walk the stage up and down like, like some teacher in a class. And I sat down. And I kept my hand—I knew the work, but I kind of needed that as a backup. And I just went into each piece. And I remember being told, 'No, no, you can't do it like that. You've got to explain it.' I thought, *well, why do I have to explain it? And why are you sat down?* For someone to sit down, it was comfortable, and it felt like I was having a conversation. And I hope that's what the audience—you make me go back years now; it's years, but, yeah, thinking about that early day. Yeah.

MM: But it's wonderful because, in a way, what you're kind of suggesting there is that you didn't know the rules and because you don't know the rules, you don't have any fear. And you, you know, John Agard, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Grace Nichols there, so you're not afraid of them, and because of the force of your personality, I suppose. How did that kind of, you know, then imagine in terms of developing your practice? Because, you know, what did they think of you? Now being from—they didn't probably realise that you weren't an experienced emcee.

SA: No, no. I mean, they knew Lemn, you know, Lemn's star had just began to rise, obviously. You know, Jim was a big supporter of Lemn when he started off. There were women in the group, mainly women. You know, they've been doing it a long

time. My advantage was I'd been to dancing school. My mother couldn't dance. No one had told her, 'Oh, black people can dance.'

MM: [Laughs]

SA: No, but I was sent to dance school when I was two. And at dance school you're taught to hold your head up, look the audience in the eye, remember the group at the back of the room, who have paid for their seats. So, I had that sense of the performance element, which is why I didn't want to read with my head down and all of that. And to entertain; don't bore them, you know. Understand an audience; know when to get off; don't self-indulge; all the things that we can do so wrong as poets. And my poetry was—it definitely wasn't political. It was very tongue-in-cheek. I had a lot of cheeky poems. In fact, can I do one?

MM: Of course you can.

SA: So, I had this really airy poem that said:

I long to be thin, but I'm fat.

A sexy kitten, but I'm fat.

A long willowy whisp of feminism, but I'm fat.

That's a fact. I am fat.

But honey, before you take leave of me,

step up close, let me wrap you in the whole of me.

When you discover the length and the breadth of me,

you'll be glad that I'm fat.

That's a fact.'

MM: [Laughs] You know, it reminds me of one of your poems; is it *Sex is Comical*? And you talk about these two—there's two people and it's kind of a disjointed poem—

SA: Oh my gosh.

MM: —a disjointed poem. And they talk about, 'Oh god. I've got cramp.'

SA: Oh, yes. Yeah.

MM: And there's a real sense, like I think you've often talked to, or someone has said, 'Your style of poetry is like talking over the fence.'

SA: Yeah. That's what I want it to be. I want, you know: it's having a gossip and a harmless gossip, not a nasty gossip, but having a catch-up, you know. And if

somebody, one person says, 'I think that spoke to me,' then I'm happy. I'm happy to go home. But the political came later, and I've spoken of this often. I can remember writing a piece when I spoke about *them*, or *the* black people, something like that. And Tina Tamsho, who's a member of Blackscribe, we went on to form Blackscribe later.

I said to her one day, 'Who are *they*?' And I said, 'Well, the black people.' She said, 'Who?' And I went, 'Oh, *we* black people.' And it's something I listen to now if I hear a black person refer to *them*, I think, *Well, where are you?* You know, your political awareness, it's *we*. And that really annoys white people because you're talking about *all* white people; you're talking for *other* black people. No, but I'm talking *with* my black people, because Benjamin Zephaniah says, 'There's us and them.' And it *exposes* hidden, hidden genetic, almost racism in people – that sense of the *other*, that we are the *other*, and we have to be very careful not to embrace it in our language.

So, the politicising came much later. But don't forget, around me, we had Valerie Bloom doing great characteristic work; and I—that really moved me. And I'd written a poem about somebody getting a suntan and getting so dark that they get done for shoplifting.

MM: [Laughs]

SA: She goes to jail and, suddenly, she's treated really badly. She's made to eat pork, the suntan fades, she gets, you know, encouraged to appeal and she gets out. And the last line is something like, 'So it's better to be orange and disgusting, than to end up like a n****r in the can.' And I did it. And some black people said, 'Oh, did that happen to you?' I was like, 'What?' So, I had to start doing it in a very fake white voice because people judge a book by the cover. And it hadn't occurred to me, from where I grew up in Manchester and Moss Side and Hulme, that there were certain—a minority, hopefully, of black people who thought all mixed-race people lived white. Does that make sense?

MM: Hmm.

SA: So, I had to then think about distinctions about it. And I also, as time went on, I wanted an audience to understand that often poets—people assume that each person's poetry is of their own experience. So, I started to develop, hopefully, different characters for pieces. I used to have one about the menopause that I used to do in a Scottish accent, and Liz Lochhead took me home one night, and she said, 'SuAndi, that is the worst f***ing Scottish accent I've ever heard.'

MM: [Laughs]

SA: But, for me, it just gave me another character. Do you know what I mean?

MM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: So, I started to play with those things. Yeah.

MM: So here you are now. SuAndi is becoming politicised; her poetry is becoming politicised, and you're developing characters now; characterisations, you know, out of your lived experience and culture. What's emerging now? I mean, how did Black Arts Alliance begin?

SA: A group of community artists went to a conference called the Shelton Conference. And they felt that black artists were marginalised and unrepresented. This was billed all over the country, but Manchester was the one that kept on going, and Black Arts Alliance was that, and we joined that as Blackscribe. And it came out of the workers of Community Arts Northwest at the time. Yeah.

MM: Yeah. And then, eventually, you became associated as Black Arts Alliance.

SA: I'm a bossy boot, you know, so I started to do the organising, the, you know, sending out this newsletter. I remember the long envelope and folding A4 about five times and Val Bloom saying, 'You can get bigger envelopes.' I didn't know you could get bigger envelopes, you know, things like that. Yeah, we started to do the newsletter, but really, the launch was there. And Benjamin had just got the knock-back from the university. You know there was all that—

MM: —Benjamin Zephaniah, Oxford?

SA: Yeah. And I don't know who contacted him, but we invited Benjamin to come and perform. And I remember he was nervous because it was in the round. I don't know if that already happened. But, actually, that gave us a lot of profile because he was in the press. And I remember when the posts came out, even though everybody's name was in the same font, his was bigger. Someone made that decision we would get dead angry about it, you know. So, the timing was right for it. And, for me, it gave me access to different art forms and different artists. And I, you know, thank the Lord for that.

MM: Because?

SA: That's what informed my work. I've been in galleries and never seen anything that looked like me. The image employed went into the Cornerhouse.

MM: Yeah.

SA: I see black work for the first time.

MM: Yeah.

SA: I remember thinking, and I said this at a conference at the Tate in Liverpool, *God, these are* black *people*—'

MM: [Laughs]

SA: —*Look at this work!* And I was upset to find out that they were all younger than me, you know. But suddenly I'm on a gallery wall looking at myself. That was jaw-dropping. I've never seen myself.

MM: Really?

SA: Yeah. You know, we did Old Masters—

MM: Yeah.

SA: —and copying out of picture books; I haven't seen any black people.

MM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SA: And I got an opportunity, you know, to work with exhibitions, write narratives. Fantastic, just fantastic. And so, I think if anything in my writing is good, it is from there. But also, because at the time as well, um, Lemn and I—not as a 'partnership', I don't mean it like that—but we were doing, you know, 'Comics Talk About the Working Men's Club'; well, early performance poetry did that as well, you know. I did lots of shows with Jo Brand, for example. Can you imagine Jo jumping up and talking about all the sex and me going up and doing *Black Willy*?

MM: [Laughs]

SA: Well, you know, Henry Normal, *Henry's Clever Human*, Nick Tocher; that also informed. And, for me, in particular, because I can only speak about myself, I learned that there's a way to assault your audience with some 'black awareness'

through humour, almost caustic, so they don't know it's coming. Do you know what I mean?

MM: Yeah.

SA: And I like to think I learned that from those other poets around me. You know, I don't mean they held our hands, *my* hand, but we held each other's hands, actually, I think as well. I do remember once doing somewhere and because Jo Brand had been heckled and I come out and somebody said, 'Shut up! SuAndi is going to do some important poetry.' I was like, *Oh my God!*

MM: [Laughs]

SA: And afterwards, I said, 'I'm not following Jo, anyway.' It's just not right, you know.

MM: The fact that I think you've kind of already had some training as a dancer, gave yourself almost the permission to think, *Well, I don't have to be just a poet alone. What does poetry mean, anyway?* I mean, expanding. But also, I got a sense that you really haven't forgotten your roots. You've never forgotten your roots, and you bring that, and that's not just black and white. That's also class; that's also there and the traditions you've grown up with. And you're not sycophant-ish, you know, whoever it

is, I mean, it's just anybody else. And so, this is coming together, in terms of your work, because I know of—who are the people who were kind of inspiring you? You've mentioned a few others, but here in this country? Abroad?

SA: 'Inspire' is a word, yes; but I'm more inclined to watch people and think, *oh, I do that, that's quite good. Oh my God, I do that. That's bloody horrible. I'm not doing that again.* To watch—Henry Norman and I used to go to nearly every performance at the Green Room. We were the only poets sat there. We wanted to learn our craft in different ways. I mean Henry's was completely different to mine, but in different ways to watch and study.

Also, when I started, there was this big poetry festival at the Cornerhouse. I think it was like three days of poets. I went to everything. I always remember this old—I'm saying that and he probably wasn't—that bloody old Glaswegian, and Rap had just started. And he took the mickey out and I remember him saying something to me: 'I can rap, rap.' And he did this kind of Glaswegian rap, but he was a very steadfast, straight-faced poet who was, more or less saying, you know, 'You haven't got it all. There's something else here.'

I listened to people read poetry that was so boring I almost snored in the room, you know.

MM: [Laughs]

SA: I listened to some poets that I never would have gone to pick up the book, even if knew the name, that move me. So, I think to study your craft, you have to go and learn from others and not be specific. I'm only going to listen to someone like that—I've listened to poets in America that have been shit. You know, I can remember once going to see Caroline Duffer, Liz Lochhead—I mean, I really love Liz Lochhead, because I love the 'voice'; and some Romanian woman at Bolton; this Romanian woman got up and read and I wept. I forgot all about Liz Lochhead and Caroline. This woman made me cry.

So, unless you venture out, you don't know what's waiting for you, or where you're going to learn something. Does that make sense?

MM: To be in the moment?

SA: Yeah. And don't dismiss somebody on, you know, what some of the publicity, just may be?

MM: Yeah, yeah. That's right, that's right.

SA Maybe they might find the right one—

MM: —And it's a kind of respect for people. I mean, my mum used to say, 'Be good to the people going up because you can meet them when you're coming down.'

SA: Not just that, but be open. Listen to the rhythms, other people's rhythms, how it's presented. And if you're open, I think everything influences you and informs you and inspires you. I was lucky that I had started before I saw Maya Angelou. That was really lucky for me because, oh, this sounds dreadful, but I do recognise some similarities. [Laughs]

MM: Go for it. Go for it.

SA: No, but, you know, I do recognise the similarities. So, I'm glad that I'd actually started before I saw her.

MM: So, um, Black Arts Alliance is now firing now. Your practice is developing, and then this amazing piece emerges called *This is All That I've Got to Say.*

SA: *This is All I've Got to Say.*

MM: How did that emerge?

SA: I did my first trip to the States, to New York. I met the photographer Carrie Mae Weems. Carrie's got an exhibition now in Tribeca and it is called something like, sorry *40,000 Angry People* or *22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People.* I remember this; it's got a map of Africa. I know it's South Africa; she's painted it red—hotspot. She's got a clock face; a moment in time, just very clever. And I sat there, and on the edge of the folding-up catalogue, you know, just a little piece of folded catalogue, I wrote, *This is All I've Got to Say*. You, Michael, had done some research on live art. I remember you came to this when I met you. I didn't know what live art was. But, I said, 'yeah', because we had breakfast together. And ICA, Lois, and Catherine.

MM: Lois Keidan and Catherine Ugwu.

SA: Yeah, I'd come up with these commissions and I got one of the commissions; and my show was called *This is All I've Got to Say.* And I would do sections of it and then I would sit on the chair and talk to the audience. And I remember one piece was there's a hit record that was about black inventions, or something like that. And I said to LG, 'You're dancing to our music but are you listening to our words?' You know, things like that. So, it had that kind of hard-hitting and soft and things like

that. But the end of it was a dedication to white women who would have married, or relations with black men. I mean I can't remember how the whole piece came together, but that was the end piece of it.

And afterwards, Lois, who was just great on critique, talked me through the piece; what she liked, she didn't like. She liked most of it. [Laughs] But she talked me through it and said, 'The best point to start writing from is your experience. And the best part of that piece is that bit at the end, that last piece at the end.' And on the train journey home, I wrote the story of that. And I remember sitting on the train and crying and writing. Now I'd already said I'd written this family book anyway, so I kind of had those stories in my head; but the core of the piece was written on that train going home. Thank you, Lois!

And it is, you know, it's my piece. It's been around for years; it's been all over the world. It's now on the 'A' level syllabus. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. It's been a—it's adapted, because sometimes I read it and realise I've left chunks of it out when you're at a performance, because it becomes almost like telling a story. Well, it is a story but, you know, you remember bits, you forget bits. As long as I get the cues right for the slides, that's the most important bit.

But I do look and think, *oh, I don't do that bit anymore*, you know. When we first took it out, Carla and I, Carla Henry, the actor, we had all these props and the fold-up bed and then we got down to my handbag as the pillow on the table. We got cocky with it, you know, and realised we didn't need all of that. That woman sat in the chair; *she* was the story. That's who it is. And I see it as that woman. I don't see it as me sat in the chair. And quite often with texts I'll refer to her and they're like, 'Who's that?' You know. And it's the piece where, especially in the States, where afterwards the technician is—wanted to talk to me about his, you know, mixed marriage or struggles he's having with his wife because his kids are mixed-race. It's—yeah, it's quite stunning. And in Ireland, they wanted to go out and find my family. I don't think they want to meet me, actually.

MM: No, no, no. But it's a beautiful piece. It's you on stage performing, and people think, 'Here is a black mixed-race woman talking about her life.' But, in fact, and this is the twist of right at the end, you want it—

SA: Shall I tell you? Well, I'll tell you. When I did it at the ICA, it was launched at the ICA. I knew a lot of people in the audience, you know, you were all there. The slides are going; everybody's [laughs] at the right part, you know. Oh and then this last slide comes up and you all go quiet, and I remember thinking, *oh shit! That slide's upside down*, but I can't turn round. And then the audience kind of came back again.

And it was afterwards people were saying, 'I forgot your mum was white.' And I thought, *What do they mean?* The next night, the audience isn't laughing in the right parts. Because I'm walking the next night, *I'm a star,* I think. Do you know what I mean?

But they're not laughing in the right parts. The audience is subdued; it's mainly white and the last slide goes up and they gasp because they're now thinking they're looking at a black woman; and they're uncomfortable to that. But then they realise in the end she's *actually* white. So, it's, it doesn't make any sense; it reverses.

I go to Canada, and I think everybody I met in Canada was mixed-race—in a mixed-race relationship, rather. So, the women would come, black or white. And the next time the husbands would come. It was quite interesting, really, you know. And some people said to me, 'Are you sure she was white?' Yeah, I do know, I did know my mother. Do you know what I mean? But yeah, that is the twist of it.

MM: Yeah. Interesting. So, the story, *The Story of M* is about your mother. It's a homage to your mother. The next big piece is *In My Father's House*. Is that a homage to your father?

SA: No. *Afro Solo*: that was a research piece. But no, *In My Father's House* came from two things; one which he didn't like. So, a clairvoyant I went to see because that's the Irish in me, do you know what I mean? And she said, 'Oh, I see you live in a house with a big garden.' And I thought, g*o away. Bloody England!* And I moved to a house with a big garden. But she also told me she saw me doing less performing, that I would direct a piece with maybe 100 people in it. And I thought, y*ou're talking rubbish*. And, anyway, I didn't want to stop performing, but I ended up producing that piece. But the other thing was Kurt Washington, Jr., who's no longer with us, had said to me once, 'The difficulty in being a son is when does your father accept that you're now a man?' Wow. And I thought about the men and obviously in my own house, my brother, and my father. That conflict between—it does happen between mothers and daughters, but that's more about body image and, you know, attractiveness and everything. But that conflict is, it's so strong there.

And I came up with *In My Father's House.* 147 men, you were in it, 147 men; 10 lead artists, and a weekend of training that I *definitely* was going to plan what I was going to do with you all, because it was really important that you didn't think you were perfect men. I can remember making you sit and hold hands in a circle; sit with your backs together. I mean, I'm making it up as it's going on. I had no idea what I was doing. Although I knew what I wanted at the end of it. And it was wonderful. I loved all of you, you know, all of you.

MM: I think there's something that only a facety woman could do with guys to make us all go through that cathartic workshop process. Probably only a woman could do that. There's so much there. There's empathy, there's compassion. You kind of embodying this—your heritage, your community.

SuAndi was in conversation with Michael McMillan

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk