Digital Voices: Negotiating Global Forms & Local Identity in Performance Poetry from Cape Town

Susanna L. Sacks

The College of Wooster, Ohio, The United States

Introduction

Two poets, Antjie Krog and Pieter Odendaal, stand side by side on stage, looking out to an audience they can hear but not see. Their words enter the crowd, moving between English, Afrikaans, Khoi-San, and isiXhosa. They gesture backwards, above, around. Their movements incorporate the geological feature they name, the mountain that dominates local geography, into the poem. Their faceless audience shares the experience of place with them, because in Cape Town, you can never forget or fail to feel Table Mountain, the massif that cradles the city bowl, reminding inhabitants of its colonial past.

Two years after the original performance, at the Fugard Theater during the 2014 Open Book Festival, I re-view the video recording. This time, instead of alongside a semi-anonymous but physically present audience, I watch it alone, identified by my IP address but functionally anonymous to the performers and my fellow viewers. After one video ends, the website automatically recommends another recording of a Cape Town poetry night. Lwanda Sindaphi, speaking forcefully in front of a chorus, reminds his audience of the collectivity that has been sacrificed to apartheid, "like bushes cut down by hurricanes / Logs, leaves, stems and roots lying everywhere."

Though the second piece was performed a year after the first one, five kilometers away at the University of Cape Town's Baxter Theatre Centre, the two poems enter anthological conversation through the YouTube database. The two poems – each about colonization, land rights, and cultural disenfranchisement, and yet performed in entirely different venues and with different forms – are connected within the viewer's gaze. The videos are mine to control, to make larger or smaller, to slow or speed up, to re-edit with little or no technical knowledge or poetic skill. The site-specific performance poem has become a technologically mediated sound piece, an object embedded in YouTube's commercial architecture, a globally available artifact

which is nonetheless accessible only with proper cultural understanding and direct comprehension of the poets' voices.

YouTube has become a dominant distribution site for performance poetry since its launch in 2004. Its architecture, which makes video posting cheap, fast and easy, has enabled poetry performance to flourish internationally. Its participatory features mirror trends in poetry performance over the past thirty years, which has seen an increasing focus on audience participation. The silently reverent audience of the mid-twentieth century poetry reading has given way to the loudly irreverent audience of the poetry slam – and the individually empowered audience of online consumption.[1] The expectation of audience participation precedes the posting of a YouTube video, producing what Marta Dynel calls a "mass-media discourse" within which "an audience member may also be a message producer" (39). But, while YouTube does blend the consumer/producer divide, it does not foster the social networks typical of other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. YouTube is instead a database, which hosts videos and organizes them for each individual viewer: in Lev Manovich's terms, "a structured collection of data […] organized for fast search and retrieval" (81). Poetry on YouTube maintains a broadcast structure while opening itself to unidirectional many-to-one interactions: comments frame its meaning but remain peripheral to the work itself.

Because of the distance between speaker and audience, performance poems posted online evince anxieties about the authentic representation of body and place which emerge in the movement between grounded and digital spaces. The majority of performance poems on YouTube are recordings of live events, the camera either held by an audience member or on stage, close to the poet's face. The recording simultaneously sharpens the mediation between poet and audience and assures the audience of the poem's immediacy, of its reality and authenticity. Online, the voice authenticates the body, projecting forcefully into the space beyond the body. The digital voice, mediatized and yet perceived as immediately intimate, grounds speech and authorizes emotion. It promises an embodied subjectivity on the other side. The voice marks and bridges subjective distance by moving the air between speaker and auditor, enacting the speaker's motions upon the listener. The performer's voice, in conjunction with her physical presence on stage, becomes evidence of reality and authenticity to the live audience who cohabit the space. Online, though, the shared physical space disappears, replaced by either a negation of or anxiety to demonstrate the authority and authenticity of the performer.

Posting a site-specific poem onto YouTube interpolates a broad, largely unknowable, audience into an experiential community otherwise limited by geographic space.[2] Thus it may broaden what

counts as local: filmed on-site, in-performance, live, the video retains the feeling of immediacy and urgency that performance provides. Online, the poet's voice creates simultaneous metaphorical and physical connections with the audience, bridging media paradigms. However, the digital differs from prior media platforms in the speed and interactivity of the connections it creates. In turning to YouTube's global publication capacities and its anonymous, and atomic audiences, poets implicitly delocalize their pieces, playing into global desires for local authenticity – concerns which emerge in the poems themselves. Working through two site-specific performance pieces originally performed in theater venues in Cape Town – Antjie Krog and Peter Odendaal's "Rondeau in Four Parts" and Lwanda Sindaphi's "Apartheid Rags," described above – this article asks how voices are "heard" digitally, how the sound of language and the images of body might carry the local into the global, and what it means to post a poem to the Internet.

Understanding the "voice" as simultaneously embodied identity and symbolic participation, I argue that the translocal connectivity of socially mediated performances foregrounds the poet's voice as the site of communal engagement and poetic authority. Online, the voice marks an identity between embodied and thinking subject, tying its reverberations to the idealized image of digital space as "democratic." As Kate Crawford outlines, "[n]ot only has the metaphor of voice become the sine qua non of 'being' online, but it has been charged with all the political currents of democratic practice. Voice is closely tied to the libertarian model of online democracy" (81). The fantasy of the digital—in which all have equal access to participate, consume, and create—is indelibly linked with the voice, which ties together its owner's embodied identity, projected beyond the body, with their cognition. As the ultimate metaphor for democratic participation, in which each subject has equal say, the voice is also a reminder of the physical presence engaging a virtual screen.

Together, the two poems analyzed in this essay represent common responses to the joint problems of the body and performing authenticity in poetic meaning-making online. Krog and Odendaal's "Rondeau in Four Parts" breaks down the many names given to Table Mountain, Cape Town's defining feature, overlapping their voices until the sounds become indistinguishable and the names lose their meaning. The "Rondeau" demonstrates the role of extralinguistic sounds in resisting facile global appropriation. By emphasizing the role of the body and of sound in their performance, Krog and Odendaal resist the mediation of digital audiences, insisting instead on the immediacy of the body. Sindaphi's "Apartheid Rags," in contrast, builds on the popular genre of slam poetry to produce a distinctly South African slam aesthetic. By appealing to and then transforming audience

expectation, Sindaphi makes use of the language and images of the hypermediated digital sphere to bridge across local and global audiences.

Despite their divergent strategies, the two poems together indicate the centrality of voice and body in managing audiences across platforms. Each of these poems is concerned with its relationship to the space of its performance and the city of its conceptualization. Cape Town, as a city, struggles with its colonial history, actively engaged in projects of decolonization and indigenization while facing a present of gentrification and rapid urbanization. Perhaps more than anywhere else in South Africa, the country's colonial legacy and experiences are visible here, and poets must confront Cape Town's historical and present political and cultural position, engaging their audience in geopolitical and cultural debates. The poem's present and the poet's presence are thus inevitably tied up in the politics of its space—in South Africa, a politics closely tied in turn to apartheid and its attendant racial geographies. Body, voice, and place together establish a vision of authenticity, connecting poet, audience, and place in the aspatiality of the digital.

Digital Platforms, Live Voices

Antjie Krog and Pieter Odendaal's "Rondeau in Four Parts" and Lwanda Sindaphi's "Apartheid Rags" each uses the relationship between performer and audience to question the distribution of land in South Africa. Land rights has remained a pressing concern in South Africa since the end of the apartheid-era Bantustan system in 1994. The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 denied Black South Africans land rights in most of South Africa, formalizing long-standing patterns of land rights. Efforts to redress this inequality have stalled: as of 2017, approximately 72% of private land is owned by White South Africans (Rural Development and Land Reform).

The spoken word offers a powerful means for members of marginalized communities to issue demands for equality.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Uhuru Phalafala writes: "Poetry became a vehicle for mobilizing people and quickly disseminating messages of protest and dissent" (39-40). More recently, "the medium of poetry in the big metropolitan areas […] became the midwife for vibrant artistic black voices" (Phalafala 34). Poetry's connection to orature enhances its effects in South Africa: as Raphael D'Abdon notes, young poets build on the traditional role of the poet as "a critical voice of the powers-that-be" to criticize "the new dispensation and its political, cultural, social and economic agenda."[3] The power of performance poetry in contemporary South Africa derives from this

tradition, and from its relative accessibility, as poetry is an inexpensive art form.

Performance poetry heightens the long-standing connection between poetic speaker and physical voice. In poetry and everyday speech alike, the voice blurs distinctions between embodiment and subjectivity. Amanda Weidman summarizes the voice's power as "both a sonic and material phenomenon," connected to two forms of agential performance:

> One is the idea of the voice as guarantor of truth and self-presence, from which springs the familiar ideas that the voice expresses self and identity and that agency consists in having a voice. This is coupled with the idea that the sonic and material aspects of the voice are separable from and subordinate to its referential content or message, an assumption that underlies much of modern linguistic ideology. (233)

Performance poetry capitalizes on the connection between embodied voice and political agency. Digital spaces, which limit material or bodily identifications, have emphasized the idea of the "voice" purely as a metaphor for political participation. Performance poetry highlights the role of the physical voice: a corporeal manifestation of the embodied subject.

YouTube deepens the relationship between bodily and metaphoric voices by joining the reverberations of the physical voice with the participatory demands of social media platforms. Unlike social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, though, YouTube does not allow mutual connections nor facilitate direct conversation. Viewers cannot directly engage the original content through the re-contextualizing activity of the re-post. Instead, YouTube is a database of user-generated videos, with its algorithmic curations driven by audience engagement marked in subscribing, liking, and commenting.

As the primary repository for contemporary performance poetry, YouTube's open publication structure and engagement-driven algorithms change the relationship between slam poetry and its audience.

In the wake of YouTube publication, performance scholar and slam poet Javon Johnson writes: "What was once a specific physical venue in which people shared their most difficult thoughts is now open to millions" (*Killing Poetry* 103). Moreover, publication on YouTube places renewed emphasis on the poet's embodied subjectivity: "Easily circulated videos allow us to feature the body not just *in* poetry but also *as* poetry. In other words, watching poets perform forces the audience to wrestle with the body of the text, the body in the text, and the body who produced the text" (*Killing Poetry* 95). Recording live events necessarily transforms them: in his analysis of "live" media, Philip Auslander demonstrates that the recording and broadcast of live events shifts audience expectations of the prior art form, yielding "the ironic result that live events now frequently are modelled on the very

mediatized representations that once took the self-same live events as their models" (10-11). The mediatization of performance poetry, for instance, has yielded a heightened emphasis on authenticity and broadly recognized themes.[4]

Performance poetry on YouTube promises intimate and immediate access to the performer's subjectivity, broadcast through their voice. That access, as Auslander reminds us, relies on a sensation of "liveness", a concept which relies on a contrast between the mediated and the unmediated performance and yet which is "also attributed to the entities we access with the machine" ("Digital Liveness" 12). The voice itself, which marks physical entanglement and metaphoric agency simultaneously, blurs the line between the live and the mediatized. In other words, digital publication makes the recorded voice live again in the moment of engagement: each comment or linked connection renews the context of the piece.

If, as Auslander contends, "the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization" (*Liveness* 55), the voice physically enacts that experience in the moment of its reception, or playback—even if the speaker is physically absent. Both "Rondeau in Four Parts" and "Apartheid Rags" use the poet's physical voice to theorize the agential voice online. They each draw on the spoken word – a form growing in popularity – to challenge the legacies of racial segregation. Their relationship to the digital space, though, reflects contrasting approaches to digital engagement: where "Rondeau in Four Parts" emphasizes the mediated video, distancing the digital and the live experiences, "Apartheid Rags" takes on the structure of the newsreel to place the digital audience in the space of the live audience. Together, the two pieces represent extreme ends of digital poetry performance videos.

Voice and Body in "Rondeau in Four Parts"

Krog and Odendaal's "Rondeau in Four Parts" defamiliarizes language, turning it into teeth and tongue, rhythm and sound: the projection of the voice beyond the body. The poets work across Cape Town's many languages to re-place and decolonize the names and naming of the city's most famous icon, shifting their voices to meditate on the city's violent history and the use of language as power over place. Table Mountain, inhabited for over two thousand years, marked the initial boundaries of English colonial territory in the Cape.[5] It became a site to contest colonial and indigenous sovereignties through South African history – contestations marked in part by its many names. In her introduction to the poem, Krog tells the audience that the piece "uses Table Mountain as the most contentious place in South Africa, named and viewed from the inside, named and viewed from the

outside. And we try, here, the two of us, to fuck up the words ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ very very very very hard, and see whether we can come to some other place.” Krog’s introduction lays out precisely what the poem does, but seeing the distinguished scholar and writer crassly declare that she wants to “fuck up” language’s spatialization and border-drawing violences elicits shocked and delighted cheers from the audience, marking the video’s liveness, as well as the audience’s role in the production of the poem’s meaning.

Figure 1. YouTube video of Antjie Krog and Pieter Odendaal performing "Rondeau in Four Parts" at the Fugard Theatre in 2015. Published by InZync Poetries, 22 September 2015.

In its movements, the “Rondeau” transforms the folk musical genre into an accelerating, crescendoing spoken word piece that breaks apart contemporary power structures and languages. Each of the piece’s “Four Parts” follows a similar structure, beginning with a play on direction – every one and every name, it implies, comes from somewhere, even as the mountain stands outside of time. Each part opens:

AK:	**PO:**
Van binne	From inside
Van buite	From outside
Van binne/buite	From in/outside
Van buite/binne	From out/inside
Van die binneste na innermost outside	From
die buitenste binnekant	to outermost inside

As the poets speak across these inner and outer parts, they test out the sounds slowly, in careful measure. Odendaal’s English translation softly overlaps the ends of Krog’s statement in Afrikaans, his voice initially staying below hers, as in a broadcast translation. From there, the poets work through the names through which groups have claimed

their ownership of the place, including Mons Mensa, the Latin name for the Table Mountain constellation; Umlindi Eningizimu, the Nguni name, meaning "Watcher of the South"; Hoerikwaggo, the Khoisan name meaning "Mountain in the Sea"; and Tafelberg, or "Table Mountain," its Afrikaans name. Working across each of these names, the poets force themselves and their audience to contend with that history of violence we collectively inhabit. As they list the names, their voices reflect the trauma of colonization, speeding up and becoming almost incomprehensible as they move across the layers of cultural violence and linguistic undoing.

Krog and Odendaal emphasize voice and sound to highlight the problem of naming. They delexicalize the vocal effort by working across more languages than any one audience members will understand. As the piece goes on, each stanza picks up speed and volume, so that Krog barely starts a line before Odendaal's voice overruns hers. Their voices blend in near-shouts, and the words – English or Afrikaans, common or proper nouns – become indistinguishable, ceding semantic significance to sonic prominence. The poem's blending of Afrikaans and English thus begins as a translation, with one language following on the other, but becomes a collaboration, as voices overlap to produce an alternative, choral soundscape. Their use of multilingualism as a poetic device marks and reinscribes the poem's relationship to its audience and its place, evoking Cape Town's own soundscape in microcosm.

As the performance crescendos, Krog and Odendaal not only enact their claims to deconstruct language and (or as) power, but also open up the poem to the broader audience. "Rondeau in Four Parts" highlights the use of language in oppressive systems while offering an alternative, Babel-esque mix of voices and tongues which resists semantic translation in favor of sonic collaboration – an option which two voices alone cannot fully offer. Instead, audience engagements amplify the poets' words. The audience's participation punctuates the poem, as the speakers pause for a beat between each of the parts of the "Rondeau," giving the audience time to cheer – an opportunity they take in full measure. But they also insert their voices in places where it is less directly called for: when the poets first speak the Khoisan name for Table Mountain, for instance, several audience members cheer in surprise.

The live audience, carried into the piece through the silences that solicit their reactions, find themselves confronted with their position in the theater at the base of Table Mountain itself, at the heart of the city proper. Their physical location enhances the poem's meaning. The digital audience, in contrast, are left with only the video of the performance, a visual artifact centered on the delocalized stage, through which the audience must situate themselves. The voice, for audience and poets alike, is a bodily projection, its rhythms and

vibrations carrying the body's presence far beyond its physical bounds yet inevitably marking the frailty of the human. In person, the voice engages the audience, inviting interaction and intervention. Online, it evokes the possibility of interaction while refusing it, simultaneously a reminder of the body that produced it and a denial of its co-presence with the viewer.

In this sense, the digitized voice marks the video's claim on its audience, which makes it live in the process of reception. As Auslander writes, "some technological artifact—a computer, Website, network, or virtual entity—makes a claim on us, its audience, to be considered as live, a claim that is concretized as a demand in some aspect of the way it presents itself to us (by providing real-time response and interaction or an ongoing connection to others, for example)" (6). YouTube does not enable real-time response or direct interactions. Instead, the recorded voice enacts its claim on the audience by insisting on the co-presence of performer and audience. Separated in the time of reception, the performer nevertheless becomes present in the space of reception through the physical reverberations of the voice.

The contrapositive of the distance-spanning voice, however, is that it promises a body on the other side, a physical presence not immediately accessible to the poem's secondary audience on YouTube. As Norie Neumark has suggested, the voice marks the limitations of YouTube's participatory imagination, a haunting refrain which refuses the platform's promise of immediacy. She argues:

> In a way, we are haunted by the uncanny sense that we know where the digital voice lives, even if it must leave there to perform. On the one hand, we can listen to the way in which the media can shape the very performativity of the voices we hear there, rather than transparently communicating voices and meanings. On the other hand, though, as I have suggested, we might hear these voices as already performative and thus shaping the media in turn. (97)

The voice, for Neumark among others, carries traces of physical location that the digital space works to negate. It brings the performative sphere into the living room of the digital consumer. Moreover, the voice carries in it the shape of the social world that produced and interprets it: in this case, it marks the poets' Afrikaans background even as the poem itself troubles the imagined identity between Afrikaans speech and the white body. Vocal inflections and styles that mark class, gender, race, and personal history shape interpretive processes – especially online, where other contextual clues have been stripped away.

"Rondeau in Four Parts"'s privileging of the phonic over the semantic makes it a poem of and for the body, and yet a poem uniquely suited to the digital world, which demands constant authentication. Though seemingly intimate with the performer, the YouTube viewer's relationship to the performance is distinguished by distance and

displacement: the digital audience inhabits faceless anonymity that exaggerates the blacked-out theater audience whose faces are invisible to the lit performers. The possibility of anonymity online has, ironically, engendered a renewed emphasis on authenticity – an emphasis that, placed on African artists by northern audiences, may reenact the colonizing gaze. Mediation tests the limits of the gaze, distancing performer from audience and giving power to the intermediary. Live performance is mediated through microphoned sound, and through the person of the MC, moderator, or director; the mediation of the computer screen empowers the viewer while alienating her from the physical presence of the speaker.

Alongside the ghostly presence of the performer's disembodied voice, the videographer's bodily presence introduces spatial concerns into the YouTube experience. "Rondeau in Four Parts" is a particularly physical video. Its handheld, shaky camerawork evokes the body that produced it, reminding its virtual audience of the human bodies at work in its production. This shaking authenticates the video's liveness.

As Nick Couldry writes: "Live transmission (of anything, whether real or fictional) guarantees that someone in the transmitting media institution could interrupt it at any time and make an immediate connection to real events" (2). The video's jarring visual imperfections – its shaking, fast cuts, intense close-ups, inaccurate focus, and occasionally awkward framing – highlights the body behind the production, extending the connection between performer and audience to include the camera itself. The shaking increases every time the poem's rhythm accelerates, and stabilizes as the poem settles, reproducing its sonic sensibilities in images. But the careful editing which gives it this effect disappears into the poem's sonic intensity, its phonic immediacy. On YouTube, the video's nauseating cuts and jumps both redouble the poem's distracting noisiness and further distance the viewer from the original production. The body of videographer, the expertise of editor, and the presence of audience all merge into the poem's urgency, the instability of each reflecting back the instability of place, of name and of power.

The audience's imagined presence online maintains the structure of performance, which Liz Gunner has argued is primary in the production of literary meaning and culture in South Africa. Gunner writes: "In the South African, and indeed the wider, regional context, print culture, that of the written word, must concede equality with the multiple other ways of 'writing the nation', namely performance based forms which have long co-existed with but not been accorded the same status as print" (1-2). The audience, as Gunner points out, is nothing less than "an interpretive community," "a crucial component in the making of culture 'from below' rather than its imposition 'from the top down'" (3). The audience's role as interpretive community shapes the poem's meaning while ensuring its continued resonances with the

world beyond its immediate performance space. Displaced onto YouTube, the interpretation of performance loses its communality, as each viewer acts and writes in isolation. The nation being written, though still a regional one, is filtered through the interpretive lens of a global, commercial platform.

So what happens when you put a poem from South Africa, performed in Cape Town, about Table Mountain, working across colonial and colonizing and indigenous languages, produced by interwoven cooperative voices, onto a global, atemporal, spatially permeable, commercially driven platform and open it up to the sovereign, individual viewer? A poem about place and the violence of naming has been deracinated, its location marked only through title cards – the last moment of editorial commentary, and the farthest removed from the immediate performance. The title cards situate the piece, but they also limit it: they are only in English, reducing the audience they address, and they define the piece by its site even as its situatedness allows it a broader power. The language of the poem – which reflects and challenges the city's multilingual landscape – risks disappearing in the Anglocentric online world.

Voice as Representation in "Apartheid Rags"

Performances online will inevitably speak beyond their own audiences, place and time to incorporate global currents. Shola Adenekan, in his analysis of Nigerian writing online, concludes on the optimistic note that "as more and more Africans gain access to digital space, […] we are seeing a form of democracy from the discussions emanating from poetry and fiction posted online, as cyberspace gives readers the right to respond" (149). Adenekan reads literary forums as evidence of African literature's democratization, bringing authors instantly into conversation with one another and with readers to allow novel forms of literary production. Digital publication platforms, in contrast, encourage an aesthetic of democracy without necessarily supporting its realization: voices, detached from bodies, become crowds.

Indeed, the imagined intimacy of author and audience online has encouraged a conversational turn which echoes the 30-year-old genre of slam poetry. The voice's connection to identity and authenticity has been key to slam poetry from its beginnings, which drew on 1960s-era movement literatures.[6] Most slams require that the performer write their poem, as, according to Susan B. A. Somers-Willett's analysis of slam poetry, "authorship itself becomes a self-conscious performance," in deference to the audience's "hyperawareness of the first-person speaker." Slam requires poets to perform their own identities and experiences in order to be judged "authentic" by the audience.[7] The "democratic" ideals of slam poetry have made it a ready performance

analogue of literature's place online, variously if anxiously extolled as enabling "a revolution in how language is conceived" (Damon 1998) and as taking "a positive step as poetry is recognized as part of our everyday existence" in South Africa (Molebatsi and D'Abdon 174).

Slam poetry's insistence that all you need is a voice has made it an appealing form for many who feel they have little else. Young poets seize on slam's emphasis on personal experience, its highly performative collaborative format, and on the direct audience's participation. In Cape Town, a series of open mic nights, competitions, and workshops have gradually brought slam poetry to the fore as a means of negotiating power and oppression across languages. However, the ubiquity of the slam form and format is not without its costs. Spoken word, as it has been popularized in Africa, "draw[s] from the evolved versions of slam poetry popularized by Russell Simmons" in the HBO show *Def Jam Poetry*, which emphasized work from historically marginalized poetry (Buthulezi, Ouma, and Shora, 21). Mbongeni Buthulezi, Christopher Ouma, and Katleho Shoro, in their overview of slam poetry in southern Africa, caution against simplistic interpretations of the spoken word, which "exists in the interstitial zones between not only lived and imagined experiences but also the local and global" (18).

In this milieu, the Lingua Franca Spoken Word Movement have produced a multicentric performance form which incorporates a range of poetic and musical attitudes. Between 2012 and 2014, Lingua Franca hosted monthly "Naked Word Sessions" in the small, basement venue of the University of Cape Town's prestigious Baxter Theatre Centre. Naked Word Sessions allowed poets to explore what it means to create an indigenous performance poetry from an urban colonial landscape in conversation with global poetic trends. Labeling their group a "spoken word movement" implicitly aligns Lingua Franca with the spoken word genre of slam competitions. Indeed, the Naked Word evenings mirror the structure of slam competitions and open mic nights, with individual poets taking center stage to perform three-minute solo pieces to a captive audience. Unlike slam competitions and poetry readings, though, the poets of the Naked Word Sessions share the stage with their audience, who are often invited to sit in chairs on the stage. The events thus refuse the hierarchy of the MC and reimagine what an open mic could look like.

The performances were, of course, not uniquely aimed to the audience at the Baxter: they also addressed an online audience who would view the videos on Live SA after the fact and were themselves attuned to global trends in poetry performance. The digital audience's experiences of the poem are structured through the algorithms that determine database structures, as well as the structure of the Baxter Theatre space itself. The video collapses divisions between global and local forms of engagement.

In the video, the evening becomes a media event, structured by the announcement-style YouTube heading and framed by shots of the audience entering the venue and interspersed with reaction shots. The video suggests standard slam structure, with a subtitle naming and separating out each poet who stands to perform. But the evening's collective structure is audible in the video, which carries the performance's collectivity onto the digital stage. The music marks a continuity upheld in the voices and rhythms of the poets, making their poems into a shared performance, mirroring a multimedia shift which Molebatsi and d'Abdon (2009) have identified as common in South African youth poetry in the twenty-first century. Music, as alternative MC, breaks down the media event's structure, forcing the digital and physical audience alike to interpret their relationship to the poetry themselves, without strong contextual signals.

Figure 2. YouTube video of Lwanda Sindaphi performing at the Naked Word Poetry Session in 2012. Video produced by LiveSA and published by Lingua Franca Spoken Word Collective, 28 July 2015.

The relationship between music and poetry is clear in the video from the first performance, as poet and director Lwanda Sindaphi prepares to perform. Following establishing shots of the audience and performers, Sindaphi steps out of the collective space, and stands before the microphone, preparing to perform "Apartheid Rags." The singers behind him intone, "vi vi se la," while Sindaphi stands at the mic, nodding his head in time to the music before beginning:

> The blood of the lamb will no longer be used to perform cleansing rituals.
> To heal our children, we shall rely on this foreign land
> And use the blood of the dead which is hidden under the brown stone and sand.
> The black gods of the soil guide us
> Lambs will have to sacrifice their wool
> Shaved for us, African sons and daughters who embody the spirit of the land

Sindaphi's poem uses images of perverted and otherwise foreclosed spiritual practices to highlight the perversion of land distribution in South Africa. He evokes notions of divine or inherited rights to question the political dilemma of restoring land rights to native people. The opening contradiction – that those "who embody the spirit of the land" find themselves "foreign" within it – challenges the dispossession of indigenous peoples. This dispossession, highlighted through spiritual and religious metaphors, leaves the land unclean, the "blood" of cleansing rituals drawn from the "dead" who suffer under colonialism.

Sindaphi's poem takes particular advantage of its performance. Its rhythm and assonance deepen symbolic connections, so that the sibilance of "stone and sand," "soil" and "sons," and the hard consonants of "dead," "hidden," "brown," "black," "gods," "guide," create a sonic connection echoing above the semantic logic. These plosive sounds, which transition the piece from prose to poem, bring out the poet's voice. They emphasize the physical components of speech-making even as Sindaphi derides the racial physiognomies which have shaped and continue to inflect South African politics.

As Sindaphi reaches the poem's peak, he broadens his gestures as though to incorporate his audience – both those present in the theatre and those who would watch online in an unknowable future. He continues:

> Hence I cage my spirit in solitude
> and soliloquize riddles over indigenous rhythms
> Birthing new seasons
> Knitting a new fabric
> New clothes to cover rags worn by this African continent.

As it closes, Sindaphi's poem turns inward to consider his own role as artist in the labor of decolonization. Poetry's idiomatic "riddles" within the "rhythms" of indigeneity become metaphors for the oppressive cultural systems that have settled over and worn themselves onto the African continent. Sindaphi's voice becomes a ritual of connection. The introduction of the first person here integrates the audience into his statements, newly positioning Sindaphi within his poem, the rhythm of his own spoken words part of the "indigenous rhythms" which would re-dress Africa's maltreatment. His broad initial gestures seem to incorporate a global indigeneity, but narrow to a soft chest thump, identifying himself as the African continent – imagining, perhaps creating, a larger viewership which extends through those physically present as well as through the recording devices to make his "indigenous rhythms" heard online.

In person, the poet's voice overwhelms the audience, who remain largely silent; online, it becomes an outstretched hand, inviting participation. As Sindaphi finishes his poem, he stands back from the microphone, symbolically ceding his place as lead performer and

rejoining the collective from which he has emerged, reforming the whole and allowing the audience a view of the total before the next performer takes the stage. Throughout each performance, isiXhosa, English, isiZulu, and Afrikaans poetics merge on a single stage with constantly moving and mingling musics. The poets' simple performance style – relying on acoustic instruments, unobtrusive costuming, the flow of individual bodies, and attentive listening – allows the audience to directly enter the scene, imaginatively extending the stage to incorporate the entire performance venue. Lingua Franca uses music to forge a relationship between their poems, which follow the tradition of slam poetry in speaking to an untrained audience empowered to judge the performance. The performance thus becomes a collaborative, populist endeavor, producing a local poetics of engagement within the global logic of the slam.

This endeavor is obscured, though, in the decontextualized, hypermediated context of the newsreel-style video in which it appears online. The video through which the event has been recorded, preserved, and remediated, does not follow Sindaphi's lead. Instead, it focuses on the speaker, effectively ignoring the collectivity that supports the Naked Word evenings. And maybe a collective experience would be impossible in this video format: the "Live SA" video is set up like a news reel, showing highlights from the event. It opens with shots of the poets and audience entering the venue, followed by an establishing shot of the audience, before leading us into the "main event," providing each poet's name in print on the lower left for the first thirty seconds of each performance.

The hypermediated visual overlay and dramatic opening sequences produce a poetry video modeled after a commercial production, transforming it into a recognizable media event typical of broadcast news pieces. In such media events, the poet's voice is lost to the editing effects which transform a poem into an event, a one-time occurrence marked off from everyday life. Unlike the televised media events Daniel Dayan identified in the 1990s, the twenty-first century event is marked not by an announcer's voice but by images and interfaces that have become almost invisible. The voice, in digital videos, becomes part of the event itself, rendering audible connections between performer, live audience, and digital audience which can only be implied visually. Posted online, these sessions present a model for others to follow. The poem's decentered, distant audience, together with their control over its playback, gain newfound power over its recontextualization and rereading. But they can never interfere with its content. For that, they must engage more directly in the production of the piece itself, remaking its text whether as part of the live audience or as belated commentators.

Even as it is primarily a performance form, slam lives and breeds online, where poets and audiences mingle across a wider range of

platforms and where audience responses and fan covers may even overtake the poets' original performance. Slam poetry online has inspired an engaged audience with direct stakes in the production and interpretation of literature. Kila van der Starre's analysis of audience responses to viral slam poetry videos speak to poetry's newfound, virtual audiences.

She writes, "Despite the low sales numbers of poetry books and the centuries-old debates on the death of poetry […] the popularity, spreading and annotating of viral poems show that poetry does indeed play a role in early twenty-first century everyday lives" (58). In the free-floating publication spaces of YouTube, poets must accede to broader, pre-existing ideas about genre, often adapting foreign genres and reshaping them online.The voice of the online audience – their likes, comments, shares, and remakes – is thus part of the poem's broader online life and meaning, its ability to circulate beyond its site of inception to produce a community of consumers and producers whose shared knowledge of the poem becomes part of its commentary. These digital sites of publication and distribution reconfigure the relationship between poet, audience, and meaning.

Conclusion

Posted online, the poem becomes both an object of cultural consumption, and a discrete event for each of its consumers in sequence. However, each scene of consumption incorporates competing publics: as Derek Attridge urges in his analysis of postcolonial audiences, "[i]f we return the verbal noun 'reading' to the verb, and remember that the literary work has its existence as an event rather than an object, we can come closer to an understanding of the multiple possibilities that a concept of responsible reading encompasses" (238). Madhu Krishnan echoes these concerns by insisting on "the multiple levels of address" in contemporary African literature (142). To read a poetry performance online is to engage with its already multiple addresses and publics, as audiences take it up in its hypermediated form in order to respond to its cultural and generic endeavors. The poem's decentered, distant audience, together with their control over its playback, gain newfound power over its recontextualization and rereading.

Even as the words and sounds are preserved, then, the poem's online life yields an alternative, more diffuse structure of engagement. It empowers the individual viewer to produce her own poetic community while limiting the power of a pre-existing, spatially bound community. Commingled publication platforms carry the logic of digital networks with and through them. They privilege creating an imagined collaboration between writer and receiver only mediated by

the algorithms of the platform itself. As producer and consumer merge and mingle online, poetry – as a networked form – takes center stage, producing multi-authored, multimodal literary forms and networks. Poetry's transition onto digital spaces grants its audience alternative listening capacities, producing novel poetic networks while potentially weakening the role of poetry's location.

The voice on YouTube remains a haunting mark of the medium's limitations and of the perils of immediacy, a lingering bodily presence that marks the distance between producer and consumer, the limitations of the site's participatory imagination. The voice carries the traces of physical location that the digital space would refuse or negate. Its vibrations reverberate into the living room of the digital consumer, but leaves her without room for direct response. As Peter Middleton has noted, the bodily presence of the author gives power to his words, heightening the stakes of traditional poetry readings. The performer's voice carries her authority into and beyond performance spaces. Middleton writes: "Sound itself is bodily, and most sound in the world is extralinguistic, a continual vibration of the air by all the experience movements in the plenum" (288) which carries the body to new spaces. In posting a site-specific performance poem on YouTube, these poets and their audiences challenge our everyday notions of what counts as local, what counts as digital, and how audiences, events, and performances might, through the disembodied yet bodily sounds of performance poetry, reconfigure those borders.

Notes

1. I refer here to Peter Middleton's UK-centered history of poetry in performance (2005). Liz Gunner (1994), Moradewun Adejunmobi (2011), and Karin Barber (2018) have suggested alternative models for the relationship between audience and performance poet in Africa. However, the space of the theater is structured to mirror the sort of European and Euro-American theater-going practices Middleton describes, and constrains audience responses accordingly.

2. I hesitate to assert that these audiences are necessarily global, as most YouTube videos circulate only modestly. Rather, I am interested in the ambiguity of reception contexts, which Anandam Kavoori suggests is characteristic of YouTube publication (*Reading YouTube*, 7-9).

3. Raphael D'Abdon effectively demonstrates the power of imagined poetic connections in his critique of Zolani Mkiva's post-apartheid *izibongo*. He argues: "Although the vast majority of young

wordsmiths who produce poetry in the underground spaces of South Africa are critical towards the new dispensation and its political, cultural, social, and economic agenda," a few – like Mkiva – take advantage of this connection to "deliberately giv[e] up the duty of being a critical voice" (320).

4. In *The Room Is on Fire* (2018), Susan Weinstein argues that the documentary film *Louder than a Bomb*, the HBO *Def Jam Poetry*, and the rise of YouTube videos of performance poetry "changed the experience of the [annual Brave New Voices] festival from one of communal camaraderie to one in which participants were vying to get on television" (85). In "Moving Forms," I argue that YouTube's dominance has also informed the language of slam poetry in southern Africa, making poets more likely to embrace "universal" themes and anglocentric performances (Sacks 2020).

5. Lance van Sittert (2003), in his overview of Table Mountain historiography, points out that the mountain's frequent representation as simultaneously navigational landmark and colonial borderland positioned it in the emergent national imaginary as a refuge for bourgeois society; Cecil Rhodes's internment there solidified the mountain's position as guardian of the colonial city.

6. Weinstein's *The Room Is on Fire* (2018) positions slam poetry in a broader lineage of Afrodiasporic and performance poetry in the Americas.

7. As Javon Johnson has argued, this can be especially damaging in situations where members of marginalized communities, especially poets of color, perform for largely white audiences, who expect them to perform a specific version of their identity and experiences. While the Lingua Franca's audiences are largely Black, the possibility of voyeurism becomes more acute in a digital setting.

Works Cited

Adejunmobi, Moradewun. "Revenge of the Spoken Word?: Writing, Performance, and New Media in Urban West Africa." *Oral Tradition*, no. 26, vol. 1, 2011.

Adenekan, Shola. "Transnationalism and the Agenda of African Literature in a Digital Age." *Matatu,* no. 45, vol. 1, 2014, pp. 133-151.

Attridge, Derek. "Responsible Reading and Cultural Distance." *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception*, edited by Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson, Routledge, 2012.

Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture.* Routledge, 1999.

—-. "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, no. 34, vol. 3, 2012, pp. 3-11.

Barber, Karin. *A History of African Popular Culture.* Cambridge UP, 2018.

Coval, Kevin, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Nate Marshall, eds. *The Breakbeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop.* Haymarket Books, 2015.

Couldry, Nick. "Liveness, 'Reality,' and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone." *Communication Review*, no. 7, vol. 4, 2004, pp. 353-361.

Crawford, Kate. "Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media." *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne, Routledge, 2012.

D'Abdon, Raphael. "The Commercialization of Celebratory Poetry: A Critical Examination of Zolani Mkiva's post-apartheid praise poetry (*izibongo*)." *African Identities*, no. 12, vol. 3, 2013, pp. 314-325.

Dynel, Marta. "Participation framework underlying YouTube interaction." *Journal of Pragmatics,* no. 73, 2014, pp. 37-52.

Gunner, Liz, ed. *Politics and Performance: Theatre, Poetry and Song in Southern Africa*. Witwatersrand UP, 1994.

Johnson, Javon. *My Words Dance: Doing Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Slam and Spoken Word Poetry Communities in Los Angeles and Chicago,* 2010, Northwestern U, PhD dissertation.

—. *Killing Poetry.* Rutgers U P, 2018.

Kavoori, Anandam. *Reading YouTube: the Critical Viewers' Guide*. Peter Lang, 2011.

Krishnan, Madhu. *Contemporary African Literature in English: Global Locations, Postcolonial Identifications.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Manovich, Lev. “Database as Symbolic Form.” *Convergence,* no. 5, vol. 2, 1999, pp. 80-99.

Middleton, Peter. *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry.* U of Alabama P, 2005.

Molebatsi, Natalia and Raphael d’Abdon. “From Poetry to Floetry: Music’s Influence in the Spoken Word Art of Young South Africa.” *Muziki*, no. 4, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 171-177.

Neumark, Norie. “Doing Things with Voices: Performativity and Voice.” *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media,* edited by Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leuven, MIT Press, 2010.

Nomkonwana, Mbongeni. Personal Interview. 31 October 2016.

Noel, Urayoán. *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from Sixties to Slam*. U of Iowa P, 2014.

Phalafala, Uhuru Portia. “Going Back to Black with Spoken Word in South Africa.” *The Spoken Word Project*, edited by Mbongeni Buthulezi, Christopher Ouma, and Katleho Shoro, Goethe Institut, 2014.

Rural Development and Land Reform. “Annual Report 2016/2017.” www.drdlr.gov.za. Accessed 18 July 2020.

Sacks, Susanna L. “Moving Forms: Individuals, Institutions, and the Production of Slam Poetry Networks in Southern Africa.” *ASAP/ Journal*, no. 50, vol. 1, 2020, pp. 153-179.

Somers-Willett, Susan B. A. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Voice in America.* U of Michigan P, 2009.

Van der Starre, Kila. “How Viral Poems are Annotated: On ‘OCD’ by Neil Hilborn.” *Performance Research,* no. 20, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 58-64.

Van Sittert, Lance. “The bourgeois eye aloft: Table Mountain in the Anglo urban middle class imagination, c. 1891-1952.” *Kronos,* no. 29, 2003, pp. 161-190.

Weidman, Amanda. “Voice.” *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakekeeny, Duke UP, 2015, pp. 232-246.

Weinstein, Susan. *The Room Is on Fire.* SUNY Press, 2018.