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Viral Verses: Poetic Movements and Social Media in Southeastern Africa


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## *Abstract.*

*Viral Verses* investigates the influence of social media publication on the relationship between poetry and community formation in southeastern Africa. As more artists in the global South reach wider audiences through online publication, poetic form has shifted to reflect social media's aesthetic norms, embracing urgency, contemporaneity, and populism. Digital media expands the rhetorical communities produced in poetry performance through self-publishing platforms and large-scale messaging applications. This influence is especially tangible in southeastern Africa, where poetry has functioned historically to define community boundaries and grant political legitimacy. Combining ethnographic observations of poetry events and communities with formal analysis of individual performances and their relationship to shifting media paradigms, *Viral Verses* demonstrates that the logics of new media, which privilege connection, urgency, and populism, have shifted offline poetry production and community formation in Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. To date, most research on digital publishing by African authors has focused on its democratizing potential for print forms, where a growing audience can speak back to content producers. By examining the tension between discursive possibility and surveillant ambivalence that emerges from social media platforms, this project highlights the dual role of performance norms and media affordances in shaping contemporary aesthetic networks.

The first chapter tracks the movement of poetic discourse between social media platforms, political rallies, and poetry performances in order to explore the hypothesis that social media is a democratizing force. The second chapter evaluates the influence of specific social media platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, on the formation of contemporary aesthetic networks. The third chapter traces the rise of spoken word and poetry slams through southeastern Africa to demonstrate how social media platforms have transformed literary form. The fourth chapter analyzes poetry performances at international arts festivals to illustrate how poetry's historical connection to nationalism emerges in the wake of digital cosmopolitanism. Finally, the conclusion asks how the rise of digital media publication has influence the distribution of cultural capital, analyzing Koleka Putuma's *Collective Amnesia* to illustrate the influence of popular forms on contemporary canon formation. Analyzing poetic discourse as it moves between social media and live performance, *Viral Verses* highlights the interpenetration of online and in-person social spaces to demonstrate the power and mutability of form in producing aesthetic communities, even as shifting media affordances constrain literary production.

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INTRODUCTION.

*On Poetry in Motion: Reading Performance in the Digital Age*



A sign quoting "Home" by Warsan Shire -- at a protest in Boston last month - was far from alone in seizing upon poetry to express political objections. (INSTAGRAM.COM/NORRIEKAY)
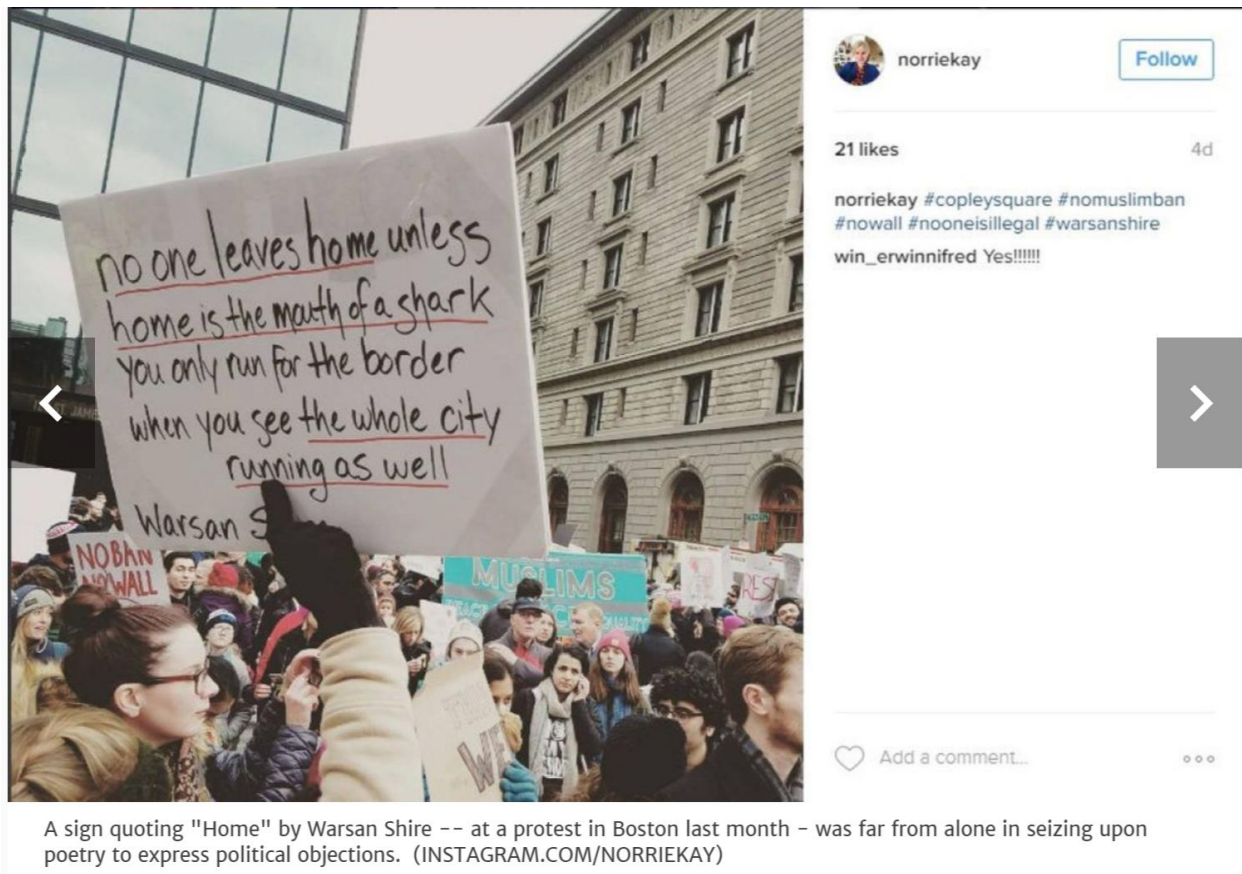
*Figure 1. From* The Toronto Star, *"Protest Poetry Is Alive and Well" (5 Feb 2017)*

> *No one leaves home*
> *unless home is the mouth of a shark.*

The words appear over and over again: in visual representations on Instagram, written

on protest signs, in the titles of news stories and opinion pieces *(fig. 1)*. They proliferate

in the repetitive logics of the digital, taking on new valences in each iteration. They are

the words of Kenyan-born Somali-British poet Warsan Shire, among the best-known

Anglophone poets of the twenty-first century. They come from her 2012 poem,

"Conversations about home (at a deportation centre)." The poem has become shorthand

for everything its listeners imagine about the trials of migration. Its words circulate,

rerouted, as readers repeat the lines to mark their own political and affective

investments. In each of the phrase's republications, it has been reformatted,

reannotated, resurrected in ever-varying forms. A digital poem from the beginning, it

has become many poems at once, a work of collaboration spoken across many voices.

Poems like Shire's function across contexts—circulated on social media platforms

and realized in live performance—because their tendency towards allusion allows a

wide range of readers to read their experiences in its words. They circulate rapidly

because they are, generally, shorter and easier to reprint and repost: as Nathan Suhr-

Sytsma has written of print poetry's recirculation, "poetry's typical concision meant that

it could be composed more quickly than long-form fiction and reprinted more widely,

whether in little magazines, weekly papers, or mass-print anthologies" (10)—or,

comparably, on Twitter, in performance, or on the nightly news. Poems lend themselves

to such repetition through their careful use of sound and rhythm—traits that make

poetry, as Jahan Ramazani (2014) has argued, interlinked with song and prayer. Thus

poetry has been especially suited to digital publication.

*Viral Verses* is a project about the intersections between poetry, politics, and media. It asks how poetry creates publics connected by its rhetoric, and how those publics, in turn, use poetry to launch their claims to political agency. Focusing on poetry from southeastern Africa, *Viral Verses* argues that social media's aesthetics and logics shape poetic production and social organization today. In doing so, it builds on Carolyn Levine's reading of "forms" as simultaneously aesthetic features and social institutions, which together structure human life and behaviors. In the case of poetry—a genre defined as frequently by its strict formal standards as by a creeping formlessness—Levine suggests that we consider meter "not an epiphenomenal effect of social realities, but capable itself of exerting or transmitting order […] afford[ing] the imposition of a temporal order" (74). In what follows, I take seriously Levine's suggestion that rhythm can impose temporal order by examining poetic form and meter as they intersect with the lived social experiences of politics, networks, performances, and power. Reading social and aesthetic form together reveals their mutual constitution.

Historically throughout southeastern Africa, poetic forms have been used to critique leaders, define social norms, and tell collective histories. As the continent experienced a "mobile revolution" between 2005 and 2015, mobile phone subscriptions

rose nearly seven-fold, and poetry publication exploded online.[1] The new generation of "born free" writers—a generation who had not known colonialism but had lived the failed promises of independence—seized on the transnational coordination enabled first by internet forums and blogs and later by social media platforms. Digital publication gives African writers independence from either the narratives of impoverishment demanded by print publishers or the congenially moralizing poetry rewarded by newspaper publication and IGO-sponsored prizes.

At the same time, social media platforms have constrained poetry's forms through platform-specific presumptions about the circulation and consumption of knowledge. The aesthetics of social media platforms, including the newsfeed, the friend list, and the "update," have led to digital norms of circulation and iteration. These norms in turn determine what form rationed discourse and aesthetic products must take online. Facebook's newsfeed, for instance, highlights and expands posts that include comments, likes, and shares, implicitly privileging more interactive posts. Twitter's search function does not return results older than seven days unless they have been retweeted and thus made new. On nearly every site, images and videos take up more space than words, so more users embrace multimodal publication to promote

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[1] For an overview of the "mobile revolution" in Africa, see Mirjam de Bruijn and Inge Brinkman, "Mobile Phone-Communication in the Mobile Margins of Africa" (2018), and Sebastiana Etzo and Guy Collender, "The Mobile Phone 'Revolution' in Africa: Rhetoric or Reality?" (2010)

their messages. The logics inscribed through social media aesthetics are transforming

cultural production. They lead, among other things, to an emphasis on repetition,

interactivity, urgency, and multimodality.

As new forms emerge online, poets and writers engage new audiences, in

internet cafés and on mobile phones throughout the global South. These audiences often

receive the work in nearly the same temporal moment in which it was produced; the

speed of these transactions means a work can become "outdated" in a matter of hours.

Digital publication thus allows poets to publish work that retains the "real-time"

temporality of performance even as it addresses a broader, networked public sphere.

Where performance poetry has historically been used in social movements and

community organizing, social media genres like the slam poem and the image macro

(words superimposed over an image) have been accompanied by a rise of new aesthetic

communities. Poems shared online link their audiences through a shared rhetoric of

affiliation: whether in Boston, Toronto, or Cape Town, the words "home is the mouth of

a shark" unite a host of concerns about migrant rights.  Social media, largely created

and controlled by corporations based in the global North, nonetheless opens avenues

for alternative, counter-hegemonic discourses. The circulation of rhetoric like

"Conversations about home" illustrates how poetry moves across social media

platforms, lived experience, and broadcast media to offer a rhetoric of affiliation for

disjointed groups, creating new publics whose discourse reflects the affordances of digital communication.

These publics—defined, following Michael Warner, by their shared discursive activity (72)—respond to the affordances of the medium through which they are constructed. Thus, as social media platforms come to dominate poetry publication, the audience addressed through them is shifting the nature of the form, demanding interactive works that reflect the platforms' populist ideologies. In 2016, for instance, Zimbabwean Pastor Evan Mawarire's video-poem "This Flag" launched a transnational protest movement against then-President Robert Mugabe. Like "Conversations about home," the poem's rhetoric was easily distilled into a single phrase, which could then be transformed into a hashtag: #ThisFlag. Individual protesters across Zimbabwe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Australia took up the poem's language to tell their own stories. #ThisFlag created a literal link that bound their discursive actions into a shared public space.  The particular affordances of social media platforms transform the connections they build.

Social media's users find freedom within its restrictions. Even as Facebook publication risks constant surveillance and misuse, for instance, it also allows writers and communities in Africa to share work unconstrained by dominant cultural institutions like the printing press or the NGO. Moreover, because social media

platforms are large, diffuse, and rapidly changing, most governments cannot fully

censor or monitor online activity, allowing dissident writers to skirt the state's gaze.[2]

And because social media companies are actively invested in promoting their own

growth, many offer free or cheap access to their sites in many African countries, making

them a particularly appealing starting point for emerging authors. Writers and social

media users must balance the tension between the surveillant risks of social media and

the personal freedoms they appear to afford, and between the commercial goals of the

corporations that run the platforms and the often anti-commercial attitudes of their

consumers.

*Viral Verses* examines the interplay between the affordances of those literary,

media, and social forms that structure contemporary poetic reception. Poetic forms

which tend towards brevity, rely on allusion, and reward repetition have flourished in

digital spaces: the phrase "No one leaves home / unless home is the mouth of a shark"

circulates so broadly because it is short, imagistic, and open to interpretation. It allows a

wide range of people to situate their understanding of the world through it. Poetry's

tendency to exceed national boundaries, while the poets themselves remain

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[2] As Zeynep Tufecki has noted, those governments such as China and Iran that do attempt to control social media use do so by controlling all internet access; while others do monitor social media use, often through official government agencies like Zimbabwe's Ministry of Cyber Security, Threat Detection, and Mitigation, the proprietary functions of many social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, require that governments secure cooperation from the corporations to monitor use. They have, of course, done so frequently.

"representative" of a national or diasporic identity, make it an expedient form through which to examine how communities imagine themselves on social media. *Viral Verses* therefore investigates how the logics of social media publication have shaped poetic production across the region, even as the poetry itself has offered new forms of affiliation for ever-mobile, increasingly urban and transnational communities. The remediation of Warsan Shire's "Conversations about home"—first print, then digital, chanted, re-printed, and re-digitized—illustrates how poetic language benefits from the affordances of different media paradigms to address changing audiences. Where poetic forms have historically been tied to communal formations in southern Africa, *Viral Verses* argues that poetic form today—reshaped in the movement between media yet recognizable in its outline—carries collective expectations for community behaviors, articulated and mobilized through public language that operates both transnationally and subnationally.

POETRY AND THE NATION: THE POLITICAL USES OF POETRY IN SOUTHEASTERN AFRICA

In August 2014, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party brought South Africa's parliament to an early close as they chanted "Pay back the money," demanding President Jacob Zuma return public funds he had appropriated to build a vacation home ("Malema and EFF" 2015). "Pay back the money" quickly spread beyond the limits of the EFF, as protestors and citizens throughout the country took it up to express

their discontent with Zuma's administration. The rhythmic chant transformed a

dissenting public into a cohesive unit whose voices, together, overpowered Zuma's

own microphone-enhanced responses. In 2017, as the extent of the president's

corruption became clear, the chants returned, this time reminding the public that

impeachment efforts had lasted nearly four years. "Pay back the money," as a poetic

speech act, created a community whose shared rhetoric enhanced its participants'

political agency, launching the EFF as a major opposition party.

    "Pay back the money" drew on a longer tradition of politically active poetry in

southern Africa, a tradition which has bound individuals within a community through

their investment in the poem's message and the repetition of its rhetoric. Historically

throughout southeastern Africa, the Ndebele praise form of *izibongo* has rhetorically

represented a community's political agency: in reciting a community's lineage, the

*imbongi* asserts the community's bounded existence with historical precedence of self-

organization—an existence defined and reified through the *imbongi*'s poem, or *izibongo*.

Given his power to define the community, the *imbongi* was both advisor to and single

authorized critic of the chief, a mediating voice between the people and their leader. As

Lupenga Mphande has noted of praise poetry among the Tumbuka in Zambia, Malawi,

and Tanzania, "Memory is considered a collective phenomenon of the individual, and

private memory is viewed as suspect. Narratives about the chief's heroic deeds may

refer to deeds of individuals, but these deeds are always depicted as collective" ( 387).

Poetic narratives invest the individual in the communal, creating a public through

collective claims to belonging. As artists build on recognizable forms, they interpellate

new communities through their address, marking potential counter-publics in moments

of political struggle.

The historic strength of poetic forms like *izibongo* indicate that southeastern

Africa, as a region, was and remains culturally connected to poetic practices. During the

colonial era in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, migrants from across the region

furnished cheap labor for South African mines and Rhodesian farms; when anti-colonial

organization took hold in the mid-twentieth century, fighters from across the region

organized in training camps in Mozambique and Tanzania. They brought musical and

poetic forms with them into migrant villages and training camps. During the labor

movement in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, *izibongo* entered a new urban sphere

of organizing. When workers in Johannesburg went on strike for equal rights, and

rallies and protests dragged on with little relief, the poet Alfred Temba Qabula took the

stage, performing isiZulu praise poetry to entertain the workers and maintain morale.

His poetry, and the poetry of other labor activists, was published in the 1986 anthology

*Black Mamba Rising.* Although *Black Mamba Rising* could not be circulated openly in

South Africa at the time of its publication, it was not banned, either, and the bilingual

text—published in English and isiZulu editions—helped circulate the protestors'

rhetoric, promoting the integration of *izibongo* into a wider array of political events and

rallies.[3]

     Throughout the late twentieth century, independence leaders adapted a range of

literary performance forms to anti-colonial struggles—from the *izibongo* adopted by the

labor movement in South Africa to the *pungwe* (song and dance form) embraced by

Chimurenga fighters in Rhodesia[4] and the *mbumba* developed by the Nyasaland African

Congress;[5] from the *ukumbi* used to debate the future of the Tanzanian nation

(Arenberg 2016) to the *taarab* dances used to celebrate it (Askew 2002). These forms

moved with laborers and activists: as Rhodesian and South African liberation fighters

trained in Mozambique, they shared both musical lyrics and chants.[6] These forms

supported the independence struggle, entertaining crowds at protests and

disseminating the logic of the movement to the far corners of the nations. They

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[3] For more on the relationship between poetry and the labor movement in South Africa, see Ari Sitas's "Traditions of Poetry in Natal" (1994).

[4] As early as 1994, Stephen Chifunyise argued, "an all-night song-dance-political rally called pungwe became the medium for the dramatization of the people's struggle (Chimurenga) and the inevitable defeat of colonialism in Zimbabwe" (54). For a longer history of the development and cooptation of *chimurenga* music, see John Kaemmer's "Social Power and Music Change Among the Shona" (1989); for more on its development into the twenty-first century, see Wendy Willems's "Risky Dialogues: the performative state and the nature of power in a postcolony" (2015).

[5] John Lwanda provides the most thorough histories of the NAC's use and cooptation of music in his *Music, Culture, and Orature: Reading the Malawian Public Sphere, 1949-2006* (2008).

[6] Flora Veit-Wild traces the transnational development of independence chants in her *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe* (Mambo Press, 1988).

inscribed national logics in traditional poetic forms, using recognized genres to build new communities. This project focuses on the contemporary reverberations of poetry's political force in order to investigate how new media publication influences its form and its publics.

As the spread of *izibongo* and other performance forms illustrates, each of these nations came into being in conversation with the others. Today, each is shaped by the cyclical migration of people, and the flow of information, between them. To speak of one nation in isolation would obfuscate their connections: how change, activism, and the arts in any one country affect the others. Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe are formally bound by their commitment to the Southern African Development Community (SADC)[7] in facilitating regional economic and social interactions, as well as through a longer history of migration following the *mfecane*. The Mfecane or Difaqane (both meaning "crushing" or "scattering") refers to the mass migration of Ngoni peoples during the Zulu wars of the early nineteenth century. Communities which had started out on the southeastern tip of the continent moved as far north as Malawi and as far west as Botswana, unsettling cultural and linguistic norms across the regions; the *mfecane* is part of the reason cultural forms such as *izibongo* spread so far. While John

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[7] Made up of 16 southern African states, SADC is among the strongest inter-governmental co-operations in Africa. It has mandated a Free Trade Area since 2008, and legally binding protocols on energy, gender and development, and politics, defense, and co-security.

Wright has questioned the historical veracity of traditional narratives about the

Mfecane (1988), the *mfecane* still widely cited as evidence of the region's cultural unity,

which suggests its ongoing force as an organizing metaphor.

Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa were further connected by a shared history

of English colonial rule, if one that saw different degrees of settlement. They share a

history of independence followed by minority rule (by whites in Zimbabwe and South

Africa, and by implicit Chewa dominance in Malawi). They share, as well, a post-

independence legacy of disappointment and discouragement, and a youth-driven spirit

of protest and hope. In each place, a flourishing of music and performance poetry

accompanied youth dissent in the early twenty-first century: South Africa has seen the

"Fallist" movement, which led to university and government shutdowns in 2015-2016,

and to Jacob Zuma's resignation in February 2018; Zimbabwe a range of youth

movements leading, ultimately, to Pres. Robert Mugabe's deposal in November 2017;

and Malawi an increasing emphasis on poetry criticizing the role of IGOs in the

country's governance. By focusing on these three countries, *Viral Verses* maps the

connections between them while retaining sight of their divergence.

The three countries differ substantially in their ethnic composition, language

policies, infrastructural developments, and post-independence history. Malawi, which

gained independence in 1963 but operated under single party rule until 1994, insisted

on a monoethnic nationalism, privileging the Chewa identity and suppressing others—

a legacy which has largely been sustained under multipartyism.[8] Since independence, it

has retained a predominantly agricultural economy but has become one of the poorest

countries on the continent, with among the lowest internet penetration rates in the

world.[9] Even though the country has officially embraced English as its primary

language of instruction,[10] poetry remains primarily Chichewa, with Anglophone poetry

popular only in urban areas. Today, Malawi has a multiparty democracy with full

enfranchisement, but extreme corruption has depleted trust in the government and

generated nostalgia for dictatorship.[11] Malawi is often characterized as politically

"meek," with little direct struggle or open dissent against the government.[12]

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[8] Chichewa and English remain the country's official languages, and the only two in which schooling is offered. However, as of 2009, only about half of Malawi's population spoke Chichewa as a home language; Lomwe, Tumbuka, and Yao—spoken, respectively, by 12%, 8%, and 6% of the population—have no official recognition. To understand how disenfranchised these linguistic groups are, consider that in August 2018, a range of newspapers took note when a Chichewa-speaking politician bothered to give any of his speech in Chitumbuka while campaigning in the heavily-Tumbuka Northern region.

[9] According to the World Bank, only 10% of Malawians used the internet as of 2016, putting it in the bottom twenty worldwide
(https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?year_high_desc=false).

[10] Until 2016, Malawian students were instructed in their mother tongues until Primary Grade 4; recent policy changes, however, now mandate English instruction beginning in Primary Grade 1, although studies suggest teachers still move across languages relatively freely (USAID 2016, Mchombo 2017)

[11] Reuben Chirambo (2010) notes the rise of monuments to Banda in the early twenty-first century creates "collective memories of a glorious past" at odds with the dictator's "tyrannical" rule (4).

[12] Many ascribe this meekness to having developed as a nation under a censorial dictatorship. In 2011, a series of anti-governmental protests quickly ended following the deaths of three protestors. Many poets I spoke to explained that they would not publish anything they thought might give offense, because the country is so small.

Zimbabwe, in contrast, has an ethnic identity bifurcated between the Mashona and the Matebele, a tension which Robert Mugabe capitalized during periods of political discontent in the 1990s and 2000s. Since majority rule in 1980, the country has been led by a single party, with multiple contested elections. Though Zimbabwe exports tobacco and nickel, it has faced severe cash shortages due to international embargoes. Its once-strong agricultural economy all but collapsed following farm seizures in the early 2000s.[13] Nonetheless, a strong centralized government allowed the country to develop strong mobile infrastructure in urban areas, leaving it with over twice the internet penetration rate of Malawi (World Bank). Additionally, Zimbabwe has among the best educational systems on the continent, with a literacy rate of 86.5% as of 2015 (UNESCO). However, ongoing voter intimidation (Human Rights Watch 2013), media suppression (Mutsvairo and Sirks 2015), and limited rural infrastructure (Maungandize and Halsall 2016) have left its citizens effectively disenfranchised. The combination of high literacy and internet penetration with media repression and voter intimidation has made poetry and social media especially important channels for community organizing in Zimbabwe.

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[13] For artistic and political responses to the country's crises, see Praise Zenenga's "Censorship, Surveillance, and Protest Theatre in Zimbabwe" (2008). For a reading of its relationship to international policy, see Fritsch et. al. "The Plight of Zimbabwean Unaccompanied Refugee Minors in South Africa" (2014).

Finally, South Africa, in the fight against apartheid during the 1960s-1980s, sought to unite its diverse ethnic communities under an anglophone rhetoric that resisted both the Afrikaans language of oppression and the dominance of any one Afriphone language.[14] Today, despite nominally offering instruction in all twelve of its official languages, English has remained its primary language of instruction and governance, with home language education offered only until Grade 4 (McKinney 2016). Following the end of apartheid in 1994, the country retained its growing industrial base. Released from international sanctions, it quickly became one of the strongest economies on the continent—second only to Nigeria (IMF 2017)—and companies based in South Africa spread throughout the region, from fast food chicken chain Nando's to the media conglomerate Naspers and the financial services group Standard Bank. It has also become an educational hub, home to six of the top ten universities in Africa. Its cultural influence is commensurate with its economic and educational power, and an increasing range of literary celebrities and international festivals are based in South Africa.

The three countries, in many ways, speak to the broader diversity of SADC: its political leadership, its economic inequality, its diversity of ethnicity and nationalism.

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[14] For more on the adoption of English by South African radicals via Black Consciousness literatures, see Mafika Gwala, "Writing as a Cultural Weapon" (1984) and *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*, ed. N. Barney Pityana, Ramphele Mamphela, Malusi Mpumlwana, and Lindy Wilson (1992).

They show how the region has been reshaped in the wake of the continent's so-called "mobile revolution," opening a broader audience to more voices within an otherwise limited cultural market. Even as digital publication has opened more markets to more writers, though, performance remains a dominant mode of poetic production, with many writers seeking audiences first at open mic nights and local workshops. These spaces afford microcosmic glimpses into the formation of poetic networks. They illustrate how people, and words, move across nations to create transnational publics connected by a shared investment in poetic form and political agency.

Throughout all three countries, poetry continues to be mobilized for political causes, blending political speeches with poetry and musical performances whether in one-off events or ongoing campaigns. The communal effects of poetry in southeastern Africa have not been negated by social media publication. Instead, social media publication has led to a heightened insistence on the local, especially as the poetry itself intersects with issues of national and transnational importance. In late 2016, a Malawian poetry workshop I was involved with organized a "Poetry for a Cause" event in support of people with albinism. Malawi had been experiencing a crisis of crimes against people with albinism. Every newspaper carried a new story of a gruesome murder or attempted abduction every week for months. Even though the crisis was particularly severe in Malawi, it was part of a larger trend across Mozambique and

Tanzania.[15] The event, organized on a WhatsApp group, advertised across groups, and hosted in one of the African Bible College's largest auditoriums, was standing-room only. Writing new poems for the events, the poets built on terminology developed by people with albinism, across the continent, and offered a new framework for the issue through which a sympathetic audience could signal their support. The event suggests the ongoing importance of poetry—and particularly performance poetry—in forging communal connections. Poetry, in performance, gave its audience a stake in the language and experiences of the performer with albinism and of their cause. It broadened the affective community engaged at the theater and offered new urgency to a potentially abstract issue.

THE POETIC VOICE IN A NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

Poetry's ability to call communities together reflects the broader capacity of performance and literary forms to elicit fellow-feeling. As Karin Barber writes:

> It is well known that coming together as spectators or auditors of collective cultural events can have the effect of making people aware of the things they share. […] But specific forms of address to dispersed audiences of readers can also play a part in constituting new forms of sociality—forging bonds, generating cleavages or developing people's awareness for their common condition.

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[15] The killings are often attributed to witchcraft practices that use the bones of people with albinism. In addition to a range of popular news articles on the subject, the UN-recognized expert on injustice towards people with albinism Ikponwosa Ero has called albinos living in Malawi, Tanzania, and Mozambique—where the crisis is most acute—an "endangered people" (Cohan 2011).

Poetry's formal elements, in conjunction with its historical uses, make it an especially potent form for engaging communities and forging bonds online. Poetry's rhythms and sonic aesthetics beg to be read, and to be heard, aloud. Its lyricism offers a unique rhetoric through which disparate groups may find unity or identify their differences. And its particular emphasis on allusion, or making claims through indirection, invites its audience to invent their own meanings, to project themselves into its narrative. Together, these qualities make poetry a networked form, one which relies on an engaged audience to make its meaning and which, in turn, offers its audience new ways to create meaning and to create communities. In performance, poetry highlights the relationship between artist/speaker, audience, and community; in print, it carries their traces. Relative to prose, poetry's dialogic and sonic emphases retain elements of performance even in print and other mediatized forms. In the mid-twentieth century, poets across Africa, from Christopher Okigbo to David Rubadiri, made use of performance poetry's sonic and communal qualities to compose print poetry that evoked oral paradigms and spoke to emerging African nations. Where broadcast media fell under state control, the poetic voice—mediated through print—offered alternative models for communal organization.

Poetry's mediation enables it to address unknowably multiple audiences and publics—the multiple publics to whom African literature has long been addressed as it

navigates between imagined inside and outside worlds, high and low brows, and the

real audiences between (cf. Julien 2009, Suhr-Sytsma 2018). By analyzing poetry in

terms of its multiple publics, *Viral Verses* contributes to broader studies of what Jahan

Ramazani has termed postcolonial poetry's "multicentricity." Ramazani, insisting on an

attention to the way postcolonial poetry responds to a range of cultural norms and

codes, suggests that we read it in terms of its dialogic capacity:

> Cross-cultural poems cannot be reduced to Bakhtin's putative lyric homogeneity: instead, they switch codes between dialect and standard, cross between the oral and the literary, interanimate foreign and indigenous genres, span distances among far-flung locales, frame discourses within one another, and indigenize borrowed forms to serve antithetical ends. […] poetry—pressured and fractured by this convergence—allows us to examine at close hand how global modernity's cross-cultural vectors sometimes fuse, sometimes jangle, sometimes vertiginously counterpoint one another. (2009, 4)

The poem, here, is simultaneously local and global, at once the ultimate expression of

cultural particularity and an ideal way to transcend difference. Reading poetry as both

form and movement, Ramazani offers us a method to understand how individual

works draw on a range of influences to address diverse rhetorical publics.

Shifting media technologies have always, seemingly inevitably, prompted

cultural panics and shifted literary forms: rising literacy rates in late-eighteenth-century

England prompted anxieties about gender norms and class divisions (Watt 1957), while

the rise of community radio and newspaper publishing facilitated the emergence of

pan-Africanist anti-colonial movements in the mid-twentieth century (Chapman 1989,

Magaziner 2010, Englund 2011). In each case, new literary forms emerged to address

and examine changing social structures: Lynn Hunt (2007), for instance, has argued that

changing reading patterns in the late eighteenth century led to the rise of the realist

novel, which in turn engendered a shift in human rights discourse; Brian Larkin (2008),

similarly, has argued that cinema technologies shaped new modes of leisure in northern

Nigeria. Yet social media represents not merely a change in the quantity of text and

readership, but in kinds of distribution. It merges technologies of publication and

communication, blurring lines between public and private speech. In response, aesthetic

forms are changing in form as well as content, as are the networks that support their

production. Imagining poetic production as implicitly transnational illustrates how

poetry has been transformed in the wake of shifting media technologies and thus

demands new analytic models for understanding poetic forms and meanings, from

models of mediated virality to frameworks of immediacy and embodiment.

Adapting from Ramazani, then, I read poetry as vectorized movement, as links

between nodes rather than frozen into nodes itself. I argue that poetry's ability to span

in-person and online media make it a networked literary form. My concept of

"networked poetics" grows out of Zeynep Tufecki's notion of the networked public

sphere. Tufecki argues:

> As technologies change, and as they alter the societal architectures of visibility,
> access, and community, they also affect the contours of the public sphere, which

in turn affects social norms and public structures. … 'the networked public sphere' as a shorthand for this complex interaction of publics, online and offline, all intertwined, multiple, connected, and complex, but also transnational and global. (18)

Tufecki draws on Michael Warner's reconceptualization of Habermas's public sphere: as conceived not through talk but through attention. Attention, rather than knowledge, is the limited resource in an information-glutted network. As Ito Mizuko argues, "networked public" denotes the abstract "audiences" or "consumers" of digital media and products, reflecting the blurring distinctions between consumer and producer online (2-4). My reading of "networks," as a form, builds on Patrick Jagoda's concept of networks as "never a static structure [but instead] an active flow among interlinked vertices" (8)—one which, for Jagoda, structures contemporary aesthetic formations. The logic and mechanisms of the network impact all public address. Similarly, Tufecki postulates that the contemporary public sphere is implicitly networked—that digital media, and especially social media platforms, have so shaped our everyday experiences that even those publics drawn together without direct recourse to digital networks are, nonetheless, shaped in their wake. All social organization and cultural production is thus simultaneously digital and grounded.

The networked literary sphere situates poetry as *pre*-mediated, created in response to and with a view of digital networks. Reading poetry in this way suggests how poetry has always been networked, responding to a range of influences and

addressing multiple publics. It acts as Eileen Julien has described the extroverted African novel, using its multicentric address and uneven mediation to create its audience: caught up in "what is assumed to be European or global discourses" in order to "express our common differences" (685, 689), contemporary poetry travels widely, telling stories of difference in order to appeal to an imagined universal human experience. Networked poetry is, thus, an implicitly public and political form, establishing communities, claiming rights, and performing the nation for a transnational audience. In some ways, this concept of poetry challenges presumptions of the lyric's "inward-looking gaze," still common in Euro-centric discussions of verse forms—a focus that, itself, misses the dialogic and performative orientation that characterized English poetry until the nineteenth century.

Instead, poetry is characterized by the tension T. S. Eliot identifies between the poet as embedded in the "traditions" and the poet as an "individual talent." Eliot writes, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. Hi0073 significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." While the poet may be individual in the moment of his creation, Eliot's formulation embeds the poet's work in an extant network of aesthetic formations. His essay does not imagine the poet as a single node in the network,

theoretically isolatable from this context: instead, for Eliot, the poet has, "not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium […] in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways." The individual artist, as a medium, becomes no more than his position in the network, a link rather than a node.

This project therefore examines contemporary poetry through the structures and media in which it is embedded. Reading poetry as a mediatized form builds on work by anthropologists such as Karin Barber, who acknowledges, for instance, that "Praise poetry in Africa is the strongest affirmation of personal distinctiveness and individual agency […] Yet at the same time it is the clearest witness not only to local *conceptions* of relationality but also to local *processes* by which persons are constituted relationally" (112). Doing so does not diminish poetic genius but rather situates poetry as a social force within a range of cultural practices that inform and shape one another. Read through its medium, poetry situates the individual in society, relating social concepts like ritual and genre to the expression of individuality. Rather than see poetry as either divorced from or the inevitable product of its social environs, then, I consider the range of circulating influences and forces—from hometowns and metropolises, from the global North and the global South, and more often than not from a range of routes between that resist such easy classification—that poets engage or dismiss in their production of creative works.

Scholarship on African poetry and digital literature has long emphasized its connection to broader media networks and institutional systems. As early as 1990, Emmanuel Ngara argued for a reading of form that accounts for the "complex interaction of historical and social factors, subject matter, theme, ideas and the ideological element" (15)—structures that require critical attention to form, as well as content. It therefore behooves us to attend simultaneously to poetic form, social norm, and aesthetic network—as Suhr-Sytsma's history of poetic networks in the decolonial era does. Focusing on the social factors that influence form, Suhr-Sytsma highlights the importance of small magazines, university workshops, and international arts festivals in establishing poets like Christopher Okigbo, Derek Walcott, and Derek Mahon—poets whose work would come to define postcolonial canons.

This project highlights works, like Okigbo's and Walcott's, that sit between the live and the mediated, in an effort to break down ongoing scholarly notions of an oral/written divide and lingering presumptions about the lyric's monologism. In this, it draws on a number of recent works examining the role of digital cultures in African literary production. Moradewan Adejunmobi has argued persuasively for a move away from the primacy of print in the digital age. Comparing the attitudes of storytellers, slam poets, and rappers in Mali, Adejunmobi illustrates the complex interactions

between print and performance in contemporary literary culture. The artists she

describes:

> tended to define their activity as verbal artists mainly in relation to the written composition of texts. First, they did not present themselves first and foremost as performers but as composers of texts. Second, their creative texts circulated only through performance, whether such performance was live or digitally mediated. Digitally mediated performance was especially popular with younger male verbal artists. Third, all three types of composer-performer strongly objected to any comparison of their performance with that of the *griots/jeli*, traditional bards of Mande society. Fourth, they all emphasized the centrality of writing to composition and textual production. (5)

Adejunmobi's findings suggest the limitations of an oral-written divide and encourage

us, instead, to imagine their interstices and overlaps. Digital production enhances the

complexity of performance forms—a complexity that was hinted at as early as Milman

Parry (1930) and Albert Lord's (1964) oral-formulaic theory, and that scholars like Jeff

Opland (1993) have used to complicate presumptions about the simplicity and

ahistoricity of southern African literary forms.

By examining very contemporary work through its mediation, this project

illustrates the continuities between twentieth and twenty-first century poetry networks

and also underscores how poetry's confrontation with new media publication

transforms those same networks. The complex circulation of aesthetic form across

cultures and regions is not new; nor is artistic collaboration.[16] But in the context of the

networked public sphere, poetic movements incorporate a new type of audience,

developing a diffuse yet highly specific address in response to shifting media aesthetics.

The interfaces between the digital and the embodied remind us that digital interactions,

logics, and aesthetics are immanent in lived experiences, even as local networks remain

paramount in making meaning. The regional remains a necessary frame of analysis for

the digital precisely because the digital cannot fully transcend the embodied, but

remains rooted in grounded networks and aesthetics.

My opening example of "Conversations about home" is exceptional in its spread

across regional networks. More typical, perhaps, is the movement of #ThisFlag and

"Pay Back the Money" through extant communities and networks, often drawn

together by overlapping participation at open mics and arts festivals. For instance,

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[16] Ramazani's 2014 monograph *Poetry and Its Others* highlights poetry's long-standing interactions with other genres, arguing, "all genres are ineluctably intergeneric" (5). Despite acknowledging poetry's particular connections to oral forms like song and prayer, though, Ramazani neglects its ongoing connection to performance through genres like the slam poem, arguing that "poetry, having long been in its literary forms an art for limited and specialized audiences in the English-speaking world, became even more so after modernism made it still more difficult and forbidding, and even the abundance of slams and the explosion of online resources are unlikely to reverse its fortune" (18). This surprising dismissal of a major shift is typical of contemporary poetry scholarship from the global North, suggesting a political imbalance between the 'high art' distinction typically reserved for print poetry and the 'explosion' of works derided as popular culture. By attending to those works specifically, this project questions and resists those presumptions and prejudices that dismiss oral, performance, and digital works as unworthy of sustained scholarly attention.

when Malawian poet Q. Malewezi performed in Durban at Poetry Africa in 2014, his

poem "Wikipedia" drew cheers and laughter when he said:

> Power is one of the most addictive drugs
> But is also something Escom[17]
> Doesn't have.

Malewezi's references to Malawi's perpetually failing power services (run by the

"Electricity Supply Company of Malawi," or Escom) also spoke to the local power

outages in South Africa (where the electricity public utility is called Eskom). The  giving

his audience a seemingly unlikely stake in his message. Through the performance, the

borders of Malawian national experience bleed into the South African experience.

Influenced by slam poems circulated on WhatsApp, advertised on Twitter, and

eventually published to YouTube, the poem is shaped in its movements across digital

media and live performance.

Attending to the influence of digital publication on poetry and aesthetic

networks reveals ongoing shifts in audience-performer interactions uniquely inflected

by changing media norms. For Malewezi, the poem's publication on Poetry Africa's

YouTube page has opened a door to commentary by Malawians living in the diaspora,

who otherwise have few opportunities to interact with his work. Digital media do not

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[17] Escom is the "Electricity Supply Company of Malawi." Eskom is the South African electricity public utility. In performance, these spelling variations were inaudible.

simply offer new publishing platforms for African writers: as Shola Adenekan (2014)

has demonstrated, they are changing the communities that form around literature.

Analyzing Nigerian and Kenyan literary forums in the early 2010s, Adenekan notes,

"African literature on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter now prompts

instant and real reaction from writers and readers" because "communities—both local

and global—are emerging from this space," where continuous interactions form new

bonds. He argues, "the internet allows [African writers] to reach readers and lovers of

African literature in ways that could not have been possible in the world of book

publishing. These young people use innovative means to make the internet space theirs,

and they are using new digital tools to enhance the potential of African literature" (138-

9). Adenekan identifies, clearly and succinctly, the potential power of digital publishing

for African writers, who have long been marginalized in global publishing networks.[18]

However, his cyber-utopian tone belies the power of digital publishing platforms to

determine what content is seen, by whom, and how often.

Today, Malewezi's performance is archived on Poetry Africa's YouTube page.

One of the single largest archives of African poetry performance online, Poetry Africa's

videos are nonetheless subject to YouTube's and Google's terms of use—terms which

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[18] A number of studies have documented the limiting position of African literature in the northern marketplace, including Bernth Lindfors (2011), who details the rise of publishing houses in East Africa; Ayi Kwei Armah (2006); James Currey's detailing of the rise of the African Writers Series (2008); and Ari Bookman (2016).

provide for their removal, should the parent company decide the videos go against its best interest. Reading poetry in the digital age therefore requires reading for what Safiya Nobel has called "algorithms of oppression" (2018), opaque structures which privilege certain ways of knowing at the cost of others. Those same algorithms also affect how a poem circulates, whose networks it enters, and to whom it remains invisible. Poets may find topical freedom publishing to Facebook, but they must contend with the platform's algorithms to get attention. They fit form to platform, adding images alongside the text and appending hashtags to make it more visible to more people. Networked poetics reveals the strategies with which poets manage the networked media landscape in which their work is inevitably embedded.

METHODS FOR A NETWORKED POETICS

In 1994, cultural anthropologist Liz Gunner reflected on the methods for studying cultural production in the wider, regional context. As South Africa experimented with democracy following the end of apartheid, as Pres. Robert Mugabe consolidated his power in Zimbabwe, and as Malawi opened its elections to multiple parties for the first time, she concluded that there had been a pervasive under-analysis of the audience's role in cultural meaning-making:

> 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 [….] The role of audience is one
> that has been consistently under-explored in the discussion of culture and its
> production in South Africa. It is, though, a crucial component in the making of
> culture 'from below' rather than its imposition 'from the top down.' (1-3)

Taking up Gunner's exhortation to re-center the audience in cultural meaning-making,

*Viral Verses* highlights the joint role of written and performative language in community

formation. It demonstrates that the community affiliations Benedict Anderson largely

ascribed to print are in fact simultaneously performed and printed, repertory and

archival, embodied and mediated. Through attention to both the aesthetics of local

genres and the influence of regional circulation, I analyze poetry postings and

performances as dynamic events, treating audience responses as part of the poem itself.

This framework focuses literary analytic methods through a performance lens that

centers sound, rhythm, and bodily co-presence in order to privilege geographically and

historically specific ideas of how poetry works.

  Between 2014 and 2016, I spent twelve months conducting fieldwork at poetry

performances and workshops, and interviewing poets and arts organizers in Blantyre

and Lilongwe, Malawi; Cape Town and Durban, South Africa; and Harare, Zimbabwe.

While there, I conducted a snowball study which allowed me to evaluate literary

networks across the three countries. This project grows out of participant-observations

of sixty poetry performances at urban open mics, poetry slams, fundraisers, music

festivals, and political rallies conducted during this time. In each of these settings, the

acoustic experience of another's poem, another's voice, drew the listening audience

together even as the words of the poem itself created a narrative through which to

interpret the experience. These spaces created communities linked by their attachment

to particular poetic forms. And the poems were themselves shaped by site-specific

audience expectations, whether the sociable experience of regular open mics, the sacred

experience of the arts festival, or the precarious intensity of the protest.

Yet I was struck, in each place, by the saturation of digital logics in live

performance. Arts organizers shared events with me on Facebook. Poets invited me to

WhatsApp groups, where they debated what made for good poetry and collaborated on

upcoming events. At performances themselves, participants read poems from phones,

played background music from computers, or recorded works with digital cameras.

And the norms of the platforms to which a successful poem would eventually be

published—YouTube's early ten-minute limitations; Facebook's visual preferences;

WhatsApp's interactivity—were often apparent in the poems themselves, in their

emphasis on earnest expressions of everyday experiences.[19]The social power of poetry

in these settings—to mobilize affective linkages between individuals—relies on its

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[19] Philip Auslander describes a similar phenomenon in the adaptation of live theatrical and sporting events to televisual norms, from the widespread use of microphones on Broadway stages to the introduction of massive screens at sporting events, ultimately arguing that, "whereas television initially sought to replicate and, implicitly, to replace live theatre, live performance itself has developed since that time toward the replication of the discourse of mediatization" (1999, 23-24)

circulation through a range of mediated settings. This project therefore accounts for poetry as an aesthetic form that moves through and acts upon the world.

Due to the constraints of historical research, many scholars continue to treat poems as primarily printed, material objects, rooted in books and positioned in an archive. The focus on a work's print materiality has enhanced our understanding of how language and form, as cultural processes with myriad permutations, can shape meaning across social and historical milieus. Yet methods that prioritize textuality enable only a secondary understanding of a work's sociality: an occasional letter or review will testify to how a poem was received in its moment, or how two writers corresponded to influence a work, but these traces tell us tantalizingly little about how the piece moved through the world. The beauty of studying live performance in the present—despite the substantial drawbacks of limited historical distance—is that we are not limited to the print archive.

Moreover, the accumulative practices of print archives have become increasingly impractical given the expansiveness of digital production, even as the actual operations of network links become increasingly apparent. The print archive illuminates the connections between individuals or objects (or nodes) in a network, and offers us a glancing sense of their connections: Harris Feinsod, whose archival work recovers these connections among poets of the Americas in the twentieth century, describes the

process as "a story of internationalism flaring intermittently across incongruent registers of discourse and experience" (684). The flashes of connection that bind people in a print world become constant in a world of always-on digital networks. Digital connectivity allows us to see how things move and to interrogate directly the processes by which they move. This project therefore investigates how poetic forms and rhetoric move, why, and under what circumstances. It treats the places where literature happens—the street, the café, the library, the mobile phone—together with the literature itself and the communities that engage it as nodes in a network defined by movement and flux. I understand movement, here, as both literal and figurative: the gestures of performance and the collectives of trends. By highlighting links over nodes, the project argues that poetic form is always already networked, inextricable from the cultural milieu and media landscape through which it moves.

Conventional methods of poetry analysis can neglect movement's transformative role. During fieldwork, I would often hear the same poems—word for word and gesture for gesture—repeated for different audiences, in different spaces. The poems' message did not change (a poem about female empowerment remained about female empowerment), but the attitudes of the crowd could transform its effect. When I spoke to poets about this phenomenon, they attributed it to elements outside their control: mood, atmosphere, openness. Yet in my observations of WhatsApp and Facebook

groups, I observed the active policing and discussion that maintain behavioral and formal norms, as members critiqued one another's work—and even one another's critiques if they were too harsh. A slam poem by a Malawian poet is, of course, just that; but it is also a piece that responds to slam poems in the US and the UK; it is a piece influenced by YouTube videos of Kenyan and South African poets; and it will shape further conversations as it moves through the web in its own turn.

The ethnographic observations which form the core of this project are therefore supplemented with experiments in digital observations or "netnography."[20] Netnography—like traditional ethnographic methods—attends to the affect, language, and gestures of community within the space and constraints of interaction. But it acknowledges that these interactions take place on digital platforms which interpenetrate a range of lived situations, rather than being fixed to specific sites on the ground. It therefore seeks to understand how the platforms themselves influence cultural meaning-making and community formation. Where a few messaging platforms like WhatsApp align all posts in a linear chronology, most platforms sort through the noise in a curated feed, prioritizing some messages and burying others. Netnography therefore entails both direct discourse analysis and diffuse attention to the role of

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[20] I draw on Robert Kozinet's (1997) coinage "netnography" to denote the ethnographic study of communities whose primary affiliations are digital. While the use of netnography does not reduce the importance of grounded ethnographic fieldwork, the two can work in conjunction to produce clearer pictures of how our "offline" and "online" communities and performances of self intersect.

algorithms—insofar as they can be ascertained—in determining that discourse: does it primarily highlight comments, as Facebook does, or re-postings, like Twitter? Do links automatically show connected images, or are they shortened to meaningless "mini-urls"? How easy is it to post, or comment, from a phone? Together, these questions deepen our understanding of the relationship between digital platforms, community engagement, and poetic meaning.

All this meaning—the communities that form around a poem, the platforms which shape it, the media through which it circulates—ultimately derives from the content and form poem itself. Formal analysis of both poem and performance therefore grounds my arguments. Close readings of individual poems render visible the links that shape poetry's networks—the structures that constrain them and the reactions they engender. Print poetry's address to a networked public is illuminated in performances that challenge divisions between liveness and mediation by engaging the audience directly while implicitly addressing a broader networked public sphere. The body retains primacy in performance, and analyzing the gestures, pitches, and embodied experiences that shape performance illustrates how poets manage their audiences. But even in performance, the intimacy of bodily copresence is subordinated to the norms of the networked public, as poets create work suited to a mediated future. It is therefore imperative to understand how dominant media forms resonate in even unmediated art.

The poem becomes a tool through which to address the changing relationship between author and audience and broader changes in social and aesthetic norms.

This project uses sites of poetic reception as a framework for understanding how poetry moves between online and offline spaces, and how digital aesthetic norms shape poetry performed in-person. Reading poetry as portable yet always site-specific—as created in the interaction between material, textual, and social conditions at the moment of its reception—uncovers the networks through which it moves, and which thus shape it. In each case, the interactions between the digital and the embodied remind us that digital interactions, logics, and aesthetics are immanent in lived experiences. Rather than seeing digital media and in-person performance spaces as separate spheres, then, I read their points of overlap and intersection as spaces in which the oral/written divide dissolves to reveal interactive, hyper-networked modes of poetic production. In each space, I integrate ethnographic observations of performance with formal analysis of individual poems and digital discourse analysis to address the complex relationships between individual, community, medium, and aesthetic object.

SITE-BASED READINGS OF NETWORKED POETICS

*Viral Verses* is organized in four chapters defined by the sites of poetic reception: protest rallies, digital platforms, poetry slams, and arts festivals. The sites—which bring together poetic performance and social organization—constitute an "edge" of the

network, which, as Jagoda writes, suggest "a sense of connectivity" (59) as well as of

marginality, highlighting how poetry performances connect individuals both within a

given space and across moments.

The first chapter contrasts the backstage and frontstage uses of poetry by protest

movements in 2015-2016 to argue that poetic discourse enables communities organized

online to sustain action on the ground. The chapter examines hashtags, chants, and

poetry as three modes through which collective action is negotiated, marking poetry's

engagement with a global imaginary of networked protest that has emerged since 2011.

In South Africa, for instance, the call that university "fees must fall" drew on rhetoric

from student movements in California, promising collective uplift and support in the

face of institutional opposition. In some cases, the poems themselves shifted into

frontstage work, creating new chants and new rhetorics of affiliation. In Zimbabwe,

Evan Mawarire's video poem "This Flag" went viral on Facebook and YouTube in early

2016, ultimately spurring a transnational protest movement. The logic of digital

organization influences communities formed on the ground, as well, as it did in

Malawi's university crisis in August and September 2016. While relatively little

frontstage work was done on social media, students protesting Malawi's nationwide

university fee hike used the participatory logic of social media and the engagement of

call-and-response poetry to transform mainstream media coverage of the events. In

each case, the human microphone effect of the Occupy era—which requires that many

voices repeat a claim in unison in order to make it audible—amplified the poem and the

hashtag, bringing together many voices in a single networked gathering place.

The second chapter asks how poetry's global networks are imagined by

comparing poetry published on the platforms WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. I

argue that each platform's relative investments in open publication and multimodality

shape different aesthetic norms across regionally-specific networks. Small WhatsApp

poetry groups in Malawi reflect the legacy of local literature workshops in the country,

even as the platform offers young poets an alternative channel for organization.

Facebook, in contrast, offers semi-closed publication to specifiable audiences—ideal for

dissident poets in Zimbabwe looking to address a sympathetic audience while skirting

the state's gaze. Yet Facebook also privileges multimodal posts, encouraging would-be

poets to modulate their form to suit its algorithmic purposes. Finally, YouTube

highlights the tensions between performances aimed at local audiences and their

implicitly global address—a central concern for South African artists, who are invested

in understanding their country's postcolonial struggles while confronting its rise as a

regional and global economic power. Far from suggesting that these platforms operate

atomistically, though, the analysis of individual platforms reveals their

interpenetration, as WhatsApp groups discuss Facebook posts and YouTube videos

draw comments on Twitter. In each case, the live audience influences the poem's ability to signify beyond its immediate spatial context even as the platform's aesthetics promote brief, multimodal, imagistic works.

As artists seek digital platforms for publication, new strategies for managing audience relationships have emerged on the ground, as well. The third chapter traces the regional rise and spread of slam poetry networks to argue that digital aesthetic norms, together with international NGOs and individual poets, are transforming poetic standards across the region. The chapter begins with an analysis of a popular poetry open mic in Malawi, where poets perform covers of poems published, circulated, and received online. From there, it lays out the institutional history of the form's spread through southern Africa. International NGOs worked with Harare-based poetry slam House of Hunger to develop a franchise in Johannesburg, where the slam poetry scene would explode in just a few years. While poets in Lilongwe rejected the program's efforts to franchise there, they embraced the form promoted by writer and arts organizer Q. Malewezi. His influence on Malawi's poetry scene has catalyzed youth-oriented poetry forms on new urban stages. The spread of these new forms and stages has engendered anxieties across the region about what constitutes poetry and whether the young writers deserve the label of "poet." In response to these anxieties, South African spoken word collective Lingua Franca have developed alternative performance

poetry forms that blend indigenous rhythms with slam's emphasis on wordplay and social urgency. Slam's spread testifies to the power and mutability of form in producing aesthetic communities.

Digital media heightens the tension between desires for universalist works, which address a wide range of audiences, and demands for artists to perform locally-specific authenticity. These tensions come to the fore in the international arts festival, the focus of my fourth chapter. Examining audience-artist interactions at festivals in Malawi and South Africa, I argue that the imagined cosmopolitanism of the contemporary poet comes into conflict with audience's expectations of an "authentic" performance at arts festivals, staging anew the poet's conscription into the collective logics of the nation. The chapter highlights institutions as agents of poetic meaning-making. It works through examples of three international arts festivals—Poetry Africa, Lake of Stars, and Tumaini Festival—each of which stages the confrontation between the local and the cosmopolitan, or the national and international, in a different way. Poetry Africa brings together poets from across the continent and the world to a South African audience, who are trained and moderated by ushers. At Lake of Stars, in contrast, audiences from around the world gather on the shores of Lake Malawi to see the best Malawi has to offer—implicitly conscripted to perform their Malawianness for international audiences. Finally, the Tumaini Festival in Malawi's Dzaleka Refugee

Camp offers the refugee-artists who perform the opportunity to tell their diverse stories

to an audience of Malawians. The arts festival thus offers a space for exploring the

limits of the cosmopolitanism imaginary, as it simultaneously engages with ideals of

globalism and fetishizes the national and the exotic.

POETS AND THEIR PUBLICS

Despite the diversity of these four chapters in their topics, aims, and methods—

concerned at varying levels with community formation, technological mediation, poetic

form, and social norms—each represents a key piece of the puzzle of contemporary

reception. Together, these case studies offer a new way of reading poetic production in

the digital age—one that takes seriously the fact that digital means of publication and

circulation are shaping poetic discourse everywhere, even as most consumers of poetry

remain offline: according to internet research company Hootsuite, mobile penetration in

southern Africa had reached 38% as of January 2019, with users concentrated in

wealthier countries like South Africa and Botswana. In southeastern Africa, this means

that most producers of poetry are urban-dwelling youth, while many of its consumers

are based in rural areas without consistent access to digital interactions. Uneven

infrastructural development, in conjunction with rapid urbanization and the relative

expansion of mobile technologies, has prompted a surge in poetic production, if one

centered on urban areas.

At stake, in each case, is poetry's publics: the audience it seeks, and makes for itself, and the community that forms in its wake. The poetry of the anti-apartheid and post-independence eras reminded its listeners of their connection to the nation, of the leader's skills and good deeds, and of their own benefits under the present system. Each of these was, by and large, a backstage performance aimed to motivate those already familiar with its cultural milieu and already integrated into its sociohistorical claims. In contrast, the poetry of contemporary protest movements—which are networked movements—has to simultaneously remind its listeners of their cause and unity and demonstrate the importance of their cause, while appealing, at least peripherally, to outsiders. In an era of social media publication and digital cosmopolitanism, very little can ever be purely inward or outward looking, frontstage or backstage. If a work is published to anyone, it risks being viewed by all: the contrapositive of the democratization of circulation is its openness to surveillance. All poetry becomes inadvertently liminal, simultaneously looking inward while exposing itself to an outside, potentially exoticizing, gaze.

The shift in poetry's address has broader implications for all its forms—reconfiguring local works as translocal, mediatized ones; repositioning the audience as active producers in poetry's meaning; and intensifying poetry's already-multiple address. Contemporary poems emerge in the context of poetic networks and

communities, which are organized on the ground and realized in digital spaces. Poetry online connects the screen to the body on the ground. Warsan Shire's poem may not be a protest chant, yet, but nor is it "just" a poem. Instead, it has created rhetorical networking, uniting people with no other common language, by articulating the unspeakable. The digital cosmopolitanism of contemporary poetry registers the changing shapes of poetic reception and of cultural diffusion. The networked public sphere is, after all, a public sphere, one linked by shared cultural referents and formal desires, one connected above all by language. Poetry—whose death has long been foretold—flourishes online, where it harnesses the power of networked communication to transform political landscapes.

CHAPTER 1.

*On Hashtags and Chants: The Collective Poetics of Protest*



*Figure 2. Malawian students protesting fee hikes in 2016. Image from the Nation.*

On 18 July 2016, hundreds of students marched through the University of

Malawi's flagship Chancellor College after the government announced an

unprecedented fee increase of nearly 300%. Blocking the main tarmac road leading from

the college into town, they chanted a direct threat to the Malawian government:

"tinapha Bingu ifeyo / apolisi anapha Chasowa" (We killed Bingu ourselves / the police

killed Chasowa). In two lines, the students reminded the ruling party of their

power, claiming responsibility for the death of the late president, while recalling

suspicions surrounding the 2011 death of student activist Robert Chasowa. The regular

rhythm of the lines makes them easy to repeat; the parallel stress patterns of "iféyo" and

"Chasówa" make them relatively easy to remember; and the chant appeared again and

again during the week of protests that followed, allowing others to mark their support

by sharing the words of the protesting students.

But the students chanted something else, too, an outward call to an anglophone

audience: written on posters and echoing through the crowd came the refrain "Fees

must fall," an evocation of student protests that had shut down universities in South

Africa the year before. Fallism, a movement which spread internationally through

Twitter and Facebook as #FeesMustFall, established a rhetoric that linked student

protests against their respective country's austerity measures. Three months later, as the

university crisis died down in Malawi and Fallism resurged in South Africa,

Zimbabwean protesters echoed the concerns of student protesters as they rallied against

Robert Mugabe's government. Inspired by Pastor Evan Mawarire's video-poem "This

Flag," protesters in Zimbabwe and the diaspora joined their stories through the hashtag

channel #ThisFlag.

Poetry's power to connect a diasporic community behind a national cause was

enhanced in its remediation by the hashtag, which relies on the circulation and

repetition of specific phrases to link a collective narrative. The rise of youth movements

in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi in 2015-2016 echoes trends in protest

movements at least since the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008. Organized

online and realized on the ground, these movements took advantage of social media's

apparent ungovernability and youth culture to launch critiques of the state. In this

chapter, I follow the rhetoric and forms of poetry, chants, and hashtags across online

and offline settings to evaluate their influence on the affective communities of protest. I

demonstrate that poetry, including hashtags and chants, offered a collective language of

power and demand that was succinct, rhythmic, and repeatable, linking offline

communities to produce networked protests and collective agency. Together, the chants

and the hashtags of these movements suggested that the distance between digital

organizing and grounded action could be spanned by poetry.

South Africa's Fallism, Zimbabwe's This Flag movement, and Malawi's

university crisis model the use of poetic expression in the growth and circulation of

grounded protest networks. All three examples show not only how protest movements

use poetic strategies to produce their publics and encourage supporters, but how their

rhetoric and poetry circulate through digital and grounded spaces to change public

discourse. Moreover, they highlight the need for new protest strategies as digital

communication blurs the lines Emiliano Treré has identified between inward-looking

"backstage" efforts to support current activists and outward-looking "frontstage"

efforts to engage new ones, using social media to mediate between the two audiences.

While social media enabled protesters to appeal to a wider audience, it is also

inherently insecure, forcing protesters to constantly navigate potential outsider

onlookers while seeking to further the cause inwardly. The allusivity and indirection of

poetic language allow protesters to launch wide appeals without being directly

implicated under government surveillance. Poetry, hashtags, and chants together

produce a rhetoric of affiliation which enables the flow of protest movements between

online spaces of organizing and publicity and offline spaces of action and community-

building.

THE COLLECTIVE POETICS OF PROTEST: THE CHANT AND THE HASHTAG

In the context of social protest, poetic language, including raps, songs, and

chants, provides a rhetoric of affiliation, helping individuals both to name their

concerns and to identify others with shared concerns. As Leroy Vail and Landeg White

detail, cultural traditions in southeastern Africa link poetry to notions of good

governance and rightful leadership. *Izibongo*, for instance, offers praise and critique of a

leader's ability in terms that connect him to the broader community history. *Mbumba*, in

turn, allows relatively disenfranchised groups to complain about ill treatment,

inscribing norms for proper behavior. Both forms were famously taken up by

independence leaders and movements in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa to

gather an imagined national community, connected through its collective ethics and its

leaders' histories, and to project that community into the future, postcolonial nation-

state.

In a media landscape dominated by radio and television, poetry and song

produced a rhetorical community unified by a shared investment in the language and

proceedings of the nation (Mano 2004, Mabika and Salawu 2014, Mudavanhu 2014,

Ndlovu 2014). Nationalist poetic forms offered a rhetoric of affiliation through which

marginalized voices could claim political power, and through which political power

could be consolidated. These forms were taken up by anti-colonial activists and political

leaders, who, as Lupenga Mphande notes, "appropriated and deployed the

performance skills of song singers and praise poets for political expedience" (377).

During his 30-year rule from 1963 to 1993, Malawi's "President for Life" Hastings

Kamuzu Banda solicited both *izibongo* and *mbumba* to suggest public support.[1] Under

Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF, chimurenga music became a form through which the state

coopted pofrgdcpular support and silenced potential dissidence.[2] Even as Jacob Zuma

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[1] For more on this, see Lwanda 2004, Chirambo 2008.
[2] For more on the use of chimurenga music to support the regime and the risk of censorship that attaches to it, see Wonderful Bere, "Urban Groove: the Performance of Politics in Zimbabwe's Hip Hop Music" (2008) and Winston Mano, "Renegotiating Tradition on Radio Zimbabwe" (2004)

lost his grip on the ANC leadership, his *imbongi* continued to praise him before every public appearance. These genres activate a host of cultural norms embedded in both everyday interaction and artistic production. By coopting and developing on forms tied to the telling of collective history, to the issuance of grievances, and to the organization of community action, nationalist leaders claimed the support of the people and invented histories for the nation. In turn, dissident activists built on nationalist rhetoric and its familiar forms to create imagine possible futures for the nation—in each case, relying on older verbal genres to integrate a possible listening public (Lwanda 2008).

As Benedict Anderson argues, the performative nature of the popular public sphere strengthened developing national imaginaries which were secondarily inscribed and disseminated in print. Though scholars tend to emphasize the print elements of the imagined national community, the nation is for Anderson a performative undertaking. He writes, for instance, that the imagined collective performance of national anthems ties together an imagined community across the unfathomable space of the country:

> There is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests—above all in the form of poetry and songs. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. […] How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us all but imagined sound. (145)

Here, sound and the embodied collectivity of the anthem evokes an affective community imagined as immediately present. The anthem, like the chant or any speech that requires many voices to be audible, requires a dissolution of the self into the communal, an engagement with collectivities that may be imagined in print but are embodied in the present audience of a performance.

The chant unites many voices in a singular pronouncement. Its rhythm, often overenunciated in order to mark its connections with song, facilitates participation. Like prayer or sports cheers—the two instances Anderson discusses—chants bond individuals engaged in a collective endeavor. Such collective speech acts create unusual sympathies between speakers: as Fred Cummins notes, in his review of collective speech and intersubjectivity, participants in a conversation become physically entwined, their breath and gestures mirroring one another's; in joint speech, such as chants or prayers, "repetition also serves to accentuate and exaggerate the rhythmic properties of utterances, while repetition of a short phrase can also induce a change in perception from speech to song," creating what he refers to as "collective intentionality" (6, 7). The chant offers individual speakers collective intentionality. Unmediated, it creates physical connections between the individuals inhabiting a space; mediated, as in radio broadcast or digital discourse, it interpolates new potential publics in its address.

Digitally mediated interactions enhance the older connection between poetry or song, community, and national activism, but within a youth-oriented, regionalist imaginary of aesthetic production. Social media in southeastern Africa primarily engages urban, university-educated youth. Levi Obijiofor argues that this group is "classified as elite because they hail from elite backgrounds and also because university education is seen as a gateway to securing high-profile jobs and higher social status in society" (208). Throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, university education symbolizes the nation's promise, and educated urban youth its future. Their disappointment is thus a striking indictment of the current government. Concerns about youth activism have crystallized in anxieties about social media, as Rekopantswe Mate identifies in her analysis of "youth lyrics." "In most of sub-Saharan Africa," Mate writes, "there is a fairly common fear that disenfranchised youth might constitute a 'natural opposition' to incumbent governments" (109). Faced with seemingly-inevitable unemployment since Zimbabwe's post-2000 crises, Mate points out, many youths turned to the performing arts as a way to make a living without governmental oversight or interference. Those youths turned to YouTube and other social media sites to promote and spread their work, building an international audience and promoting dissident messages (112). Online, their messages could reach a local audience

disenfranchised by state-controlled media, as well as a diasporic audience excluded from the state's address.

The chant broadens the active community to include those who might share in its "imagined sound" which, Anderson observes, produces "a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests—above all in the form of poetry and song" (145). Contemporaneity, as much as sensation, is key to Anderson's "imagined sound": the sense of occupying the same affective mode at the same moment of time with an unseen other. Poetry's imagined sound—whether the internal monologue of the reader or the imagined chorus of the individual singer—binds a local audience. The hashtag, in turn, connects code and speech to interpellate a translocal public. The hashtag broadens the context in which poetry operates, both expanding its audience and shifting its address, but simultaneously limiting the time frame of interaction and promising a shared temporality across a vast and unknowable public. When it functions as a link, the hashtag offers the sort of allusive quality for which poetry is known. But as often, it is transformed from a hyperlink into a discursive phrase that links in-person communities to their online publics. On shirts, in chants, and online, the hashtag becomes a collective refrain linking thousands of individual stories into a single, transnational movement.

Like poetry and chants, the hashtag is generally allusive; it makes use of repetition with variation; and it tends towards the sonically pleasant, often highly rhythmic, assonant, and even rhyming. The poem and the hashtag work across the dual-fronted nature of social media organizing that Emiliano Treré has described as "frontstage and backstage activism." Each creates "backstage" affiliations through allusions, which require a shared baseline cultural knowledge. At the same time, they allow their listeners to imagine a broad range of experiences within a single rhetorical frame, producing a "frontstage" advertisement. But the line between frontstage and backstage is not always clear. Social media platforms promise controlled publication but risk endless sharing. The methods of address, especially for dissident movements, must therefore shift to account for the joint threat of exposure and promise of an audience.

The chant and the hashtag rely on a "human microphone" effect, which requires the crowd to repeat the speaker's words. This effect theoretically popularizes speech by ensuring the collectivity's investment in the individual's words. The "human microphone," a term which became popular during the Occupy movement to describe crowds repeating a speaker's words to amplify them, aims to democratize the sound of a movement. At the same time, this phenomenon coerces individual voices, compelling them to repeat another's words. The coerciveness of the chant, and the human

microphone, is the flattening of a message into its barest (and often most extreme) form.

Such works constitute a form of what Thomas McGrath calls "tactical poetry," which

can "at its very worst turn into simply slogans." However, such works are "not there to

*expand* consciousness, but to *direct* it, point it, give it focus." For McGrath, tactical

poetry—an umbrella under which protest poems, chants, and hashtags fall—

paradoxically "reduce consciousness" in the interest of motivating action. As tactical

poetry, the hashtag technologizes the human voice, transforming it from instrument of

individual expression into an instrument of mass remediation.

The human microphone effect means that a hashtag only becomes a conversation

if enough people reproduce it, whether in earnest or irony. Similarly, call-and-response

chants give a mass of people—already invested in an event and a cause but

disconnected from one another—the ready rhetoric of a common language, a deepened

investment in the message of the chant, and an embodied connection to the community

in which they chant. First proposed on Twitter in 2007 to allow coordinated

conversation, the hashtag is a technological, computational form—one that imbues

meaning through its promise of literal linking and largely opens conversations to public

perusal, for good or ill. The network effects of the hashtag, its ability to engage a

broader crowd than would be privy to any one message, combines with the affective

power of poetic speech—the actual words that define any given hashtag—to create collective speech-acts.

The rise of the hashtag as a dominant means of organizing transnational and diasporic protest movements has not displaced the role of protest poetry: instead, it has enhanced its spread, while making its users more readily surveilled. Poetic refrains offer a concisely repeatable message by which the protest can be recognized. The hashtag links the rising protest movements, bringing them to the attention of those outside the movement. The chant offers a sense of connection between protestors separated by geography and even underlying motives. And the poetry that accompanies and grows out of it offers a language of affiliation and motivation for those already involved. Through a shared investment in poetic rhetoric, communities formed online can find a voice on the ground, and those taking place on the ground find audiences online. Together, the hashtag, the chant, and the poem consolidate grassroots movements by developing a terminology and rhythm through which protestors can identify themselves, recognize one another, and present their demands to the world.

#FEESMUSTFALL: THE HASHTAG AS POETRY

Each evening in October and November 2015, dozens of students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) gathered in the recently occupied and renamed Azania

House—also known as the Bremner building, the site of UCT's administrative offices and of a 1968 sit-in protest again apartheid—and listened to one another's poems, stories, and rants in the designated healing space. Protesting an education system that privileged European epistemologies, students turned to one another for alternative, Afrocentric forms of knowledge. Poetry's translanguaging, its collective address, and its allusivity marked an alternative to the prosaic forms of the Western academy, which—as Leketi Makalela writes—has historically "operated as extensions of colonial outposts to serve the interests of the former colonisers, while simultaneously stripping the local communities of intellectual stimulation and relevance to solve local issues" (1). As UCT students protested the high fees that kept many off the campus altogether, they came together in shared discursive spaces including Azania House and Twitter to produce alternative rhetorical structures through which a national protest movement would take shape.

In these spaces, student activists produced collective speech that signaled their shared cause: transforming the country's educational systems and expanding access to higher education. Protests began on 19 September 2015, when South Africa's education secretary Blade Nzimande announced an 8% fee increase, well above inflation, across all universities. Within days, students across the country mobilized through Twitter and WhatsApp to demand that "fees must fall." Their demands quickly rose to national

attention through the hashtag channel #FeesMustFall. Prior to the announcement,

students had been protesting individual schools' policies for months: the language of

instruction at Afrikaans schools; workers' rights and colonial symbols at UCT; and high

fees at Rhodes University and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Early

protests were local, with local concerns, and media coverage was similarly discrete.[3]

Catalyzed by the national fee hikes, students began protesting broader issues of

inequality in higher education. Students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits)

shut down the university, barricading entrances and chanting "fees must fall."

#FeesMustFall spread to Rhodes University and UCT the next day, and to universities

throughout the country by the next week. Communication over Facebook allowed rapid

organizing, and the phrase "hashtag fees must fall" became verbal shorthand for the

movement. The hashtag trended on Twitter, bringing the movement international

attention. On 23 October, after weeks of protest and poor press coverage, Pres. Zuma

announced there would be no fee increase that year. Schools reopened within a few

days, only for protests to begin again when fee hikes were again announced in August

2016.

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[3] For a thorough history of early protests, see Susan Booysen, ed., *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* (2016), Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa,* and Robyn Baragwanyth, "Social Media and Contentious Politics in South Africa." (2016)

For many protesters, the call of "Fees must fall" was part of a revolution, a follow-up to the anti-apartheid movement of the late twentieth century. One common t-shirt at protests read "#feesmustfall" and "#decolonizeeducation" on the front, with the words "The revolution will be black-led and intersectional—or it will be bullshit" on the back.[4] The chants and images of the protests thus brought together global rhetorics shaped on the digital media through which the viral community itself formed. The language of decolonization pervaded both the protest chants and the poetry performed at fundraisers, protests, and videos circulated on Facebook and Twitter.

In this section, I examine the hashtags and poetry of #FeesMustFall to argue that, while hashtags like #FeesMustFall linked the movement to international student protests, the movement's poems and chants maintained a connection to South Africa's national history and promise. I combine documentation drawn from other scholars with ethnographic observations drawn from October to December 2016 at the University of Cape Town, Stellenbosch University, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. To work through a representative example of how poetry mediates the circulation of ideas through social media, I turn to a close analysis of Siphokazi Jonas and Kyle Louw's video-poem "Books Not Bullets." Integrating participant observation with discourse

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[4] The phrase refers to American feminist writer Flavia Dzodan's famous blog post "My feminism will be intersectional—or it will be bullshit" (2011), a phrase which has spread widely on internet forums devoted to issues of social justices.

analysis and close readings illustrates the influence of digital media in creating novel protest forms that drawn on and appeal to historical models of national action.

*#FeesMustFall and the Rhetoric of Progress*

As Pundy Pillay (2016) has argued, the protests were a challenge to the slow politics of hope that had characterized the ANC government since apartheid. Far from acting against the nation,  the protestors presented their actions as carrying out its ideals: they often called "Amandla" (power), a popular rallying cry of the anti-apartheid movement, and even sang the national anthem (Mati 2016). The anthem, as Benedict Anderson suggests and as Shana Redmond has powerfully shown (2013), provides a uniquely affiliating rhetoric and rhythm for a nation. It establishes the students' investments in the ideology of the nation. Such chants created a transhistorical affiliation between the twenty-first-century students and their twentieth-century counterparts, creating historical referents that tie the movement into the nation's accepted history.

Beyond the literal repetition of these collective chants, students referenced key moments in South African history: at the march on the South African Union Buildings on 23 October 2015, for instance, one sign read, "We will do to the ANC, what the youth of '76 did to the apartheid government," referencing the year that police shot student protestors in Soweto, launching months of violence. The year 1994, when apartheid

officially ended and majority rule nominally began, features in the chants and signs as an empty promise, a failed experiment. For the Fallists, their movement was a natural successor to the anti-apartheid movement, and the ANC government's corruption and slow progress prevented their success much as apartheid policies did their predecessors'. Another common image in their chants was the Marikana Massacres in 2012, when soldiers fired on striking miners, and many of the most popular songs speak to the history of labor struggles in the country (Mati 2016). In each case, the protestors position themselves on the side of dissidents—whether students, disenfranchised citizens, or unionizing miners—and link the current administration to the apartheid structures that national leaders had once fought.

As the specifics of local concerns fell away, the generality of #FeesMustFall allowed it to circulate and expand rapidly, beyond what any local protest or hashtag could achieve. It quickly trended on national Twitter circuits, bringing it first into new circles, and—eventually—into mainstream, broadcast media networks like SABC. As Daniel de Kadt has shown, between 19 October and 22 October, the hashtag #FeesMustFall expanded nearly four-fold, from 50,000 to 200,000 tweets per day. Networked attention often has such an outsized effect. Twitter celebrities, or "Twitterati," act as human microphones, using their following as virtual megaphones (Lovink 2011). #FeesMustFall gained traction, then, because it was a non-local hashtag,

and therefore able to move between university campuses, national Parliament, and

Facebook itself. The virtual gathering place it produced, as a link, mirrored and

expanded the gathering places of protest, extending the discourse of the campus

community into a broader national sphere. Its social and digital character also reflected

the youth movement it sought to represent: then-Vice Chancellor of UCT Max Price

spoke about the Fees Must Fall Movement frequently, but he never tweeted

"#FeesMustFall." His speeches addressed a public organized through traditional media

channels and largely ignorant of the discourse circulating online. The rhetoric of the

movement, though tied to nationalist politics, was also tied to a digital network that

could create movement faster and beyond the reach of local protests.

The hashtag channel #FeesMustFall carried the rhythm and rhetoric of the chant

into the multi-authorial organizing sphere of Twitter.[5] As a rhetorical link, it spilled

over from Twitter to Facebook and even onto material objects like protest signs and t-

shirts. The object par excellence of digital communication, the hashtag models the

movement of language between grounded and networked discourse. As Sauter and

Bruns argue of #auspol, "Hashtags are thus neither fully material nor fully symbolic but

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[5] In fact, the hashtag channel #FeesMustFall had been used by students protesting fee hikes at the University of California had used the same hashtag in 2014. The earlier use rendered it vulnerable to confusion but also enhanced its effects by marking the link between the South African protests and global protests against austerity measures. Algorithmically, too, its earlier use meant the hashtag trended more quickly and broadly than it otherwise would have, bringing #FeesMustFall South Africa to the attention of a global audience.

rather exercise an important agency in the construction of power relations, events and knowledge" (48). The hashtag enabled a community with little access to broadcast media to simultaneously organize local movements and advertise their cause to national onlookers. By analyzing the hashtag as a medium through which discourse flows, we see that its de-technologized circulation—at protests and in poetry—created an affective community across local and national bounds.

*Poetic Amplifications of Protest*

As the protests gained momentum, young poets—many of them students or recent alumni—organized events, published poems on social media, and spoke at protests. In places like Azania House, politically explicit poetry was interspersed with poetry about personal pain, drawing the individual protesters together in an affective community of dissent. The performance space brought the audience into the poem, demanding either verbal action or visual attention. At the events I attended in Cape Town—including open mic nights, arts-based fundraisers, and organized performances—audience members who spoke during performances were routinely hushed by others, collectively insisting on a space of shared attentiveness. Unlike chants and hashtags, which require multiple voices, poetic performance demanded attention to a single voice. Nonetheless, these poems exceeded the moment of their performance: they were recorded by friends and spectators, shared on social media, and repeated at

the protests. Whether live or digitized, the audience's responsiveness shapes the poem, their reception mingling with the poet's performance in an essentially collaborative production. Poetry itself provided a bridge between digitally mediated and pre-mediated protest actions.

Performance is a faster medium than print: in personal interviews, many poets noted that writing for performance poems allowed less time for reflection, but could address much more urgent issues. Poet and then-student Siphokazi Jonas, for example, spoke of the need for thoughtful reflection and serious time, a need that seemed impossible when crafting poetry during protest. "Spoken word," she told me, "especially in South Africa, is accompanied by this militancy, the urgency of the moment. It's this militant poetry and it's very in your face. It is kind of this second wave of protest poetry, because there is that energy of rallying and creating a community that says, ok, this is how we'd like to forge the present and the future." As Jonas describes, performance poetry melds the urgency of chants with the public responsibility of social media. In performance, poets tend to produce more quickly, improvising as necessary to speak to and produce meaning with their audiences.

During the strikes, Jonas worked with fellow poet and student Kyle Louw to produce the poem-video "Books Not Bullets," innovating on Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai's slogan in her work to improve women's access to education in Pakistan

(Malala Fund 2015). Jonas told me the poem was written and recorded in under thirty-

six hours, to be posted online and shared just when it was most needed.  Like "Fees

Must Fall," the slogan "Books Not Bullets" had circulated through Twitter to become an

international call to action against oppression and for education (Black Matter Media

2016). Louw and Jonas's poem situates the violence unfolding at South African

universities against the global backdrop of unequal access to education addressed in

Malala's campaign. Louw posted the poem to YouTube on 25 November 2015, barely

six weeks after protests first began. Performed in the rhythms of slam poetry, the poem

actively claims the audience's attention, evoking "the energy of rallying and creating a

community" that would respond to the rhythms of the poem and support the emerging

struggle.

Much like the protests themselves, "Books Not Bullets" was conceived for and

through an online community, realized on the street, and propagated digitally. Its

ultimate publication was on YouTube, where it directly addressed those who were

already protesting. A tactical poem written for a movement, "Books Not Bullets"

renews the story of the South African nation as one of protest, focusing students'

energies through a series of slogans and anecdotes. It draws an implicit identification

between its speakers and its imagined audience through shifting perspectives and

forms of address. The poem addresses the promises of education, the failure of the post-

apartheid government, and the struggles of current students. It compels its audience

into an inevitable identification with the speakers and their cause.

Throughout the video, Louw and Jonas occupy important spaces on campus,

beginning with the iconic steps of the campus's Jameson Memorial Hall. Named after

Leander Starr Jameson, a British colonial officer who attempted to invade the Transvaal

in the early twentieth century, Jameson Plaza and Memorial Hall recall the growth of

English colonial presence beyond Cape Town. This is the main gathering point on

campus and the central focus of every publicity shot. To occupy it is to situate oneself at

the campus's physical and operational center. Renaming it, along with other key

buildings on campus, was a primary demand of the #FeesMustFall campaign's drive to

decolonize educational facilities. In occupying colonized territory, the poets the space of

the university as a space of protest, the very grounds of contention. The poem video

traces the connection between bodies, sound, protest, and hashtag, suggesting that a

new wave of protest poetry, one which spans the physical and the virtual, is the proper

response to the hashtag activism of Fees Must Fall.

Before the poem begins, shouts and gunshots ring out over a black screen,

disorienting noises that evoke the sounds of protest. Against this soundscape, Jonas's

voice calls out, "P-p-p-pages," the aspirated "p" mimicking the sound of automatic

gunfire. Louw repeats the sounds, and they trade the word back and forth, sounding

out its possibilities to move into the sounds of the poem itself. Throughout, the rhythm

of their speech evokes the rhythm of chants, with unusually strong emphasis on

unaccented syllables and a trochaic pattern typical of anglophone chants. Strong

rhymes and assonance make the lines both memorable and repeatable, even as they

engage with the growing genre of slam poetry. Jonas opens the poem: "Bookbags, like

bookshelves, clutched the spine of a lead magazines, knees / At 45, 60, then 90 degrees."

Jonas enhances the aggression of the opening lines by emphasizing the hard sounds of

the "b"s and "k"s. Using her voice to evoke the invasion of "lead magazines", Jonas's

performance allows her to embody the threatened student who, under pressure to leave

her educational institution, stands her ground.

    As the poem develops, Jonas's and Louw's voices entwine in an escalating

rhythm that mimics the escalating violence protestors faced, from armed guards on

campuses to police armed with tear-gas and rubber bullets at parliament. Throughout

the poem, South Africa's history of apartheid and present of inequality entwine in a

critique of the neoliberal ideology that allows liberation leaders to prosper while

maintaining structures of inequality shaped under apartheid. In the poem's final

segment, the speakers claim the legacy of the liberation struggle by asserting that police

brutality against the protesters "will reveal how a liberation after-party betrayed them /

with the blade in their backs. And yet / It took 39 springs from '76 for revolution's

children / to bloom." Jonas's breaths interrupt the thought, defamiliarizing the common image—of the 1976 children's march and Soweto uprising, often figured as a turning point in the anti-apartheid movement—to create suspense as the listener rushes to fills in the line. The audience's imagined, silent imagined responses enter even the static filmed performance.

The poem ends back outside the door of Jameson Hall, which the speakers block as they stare directly at the camera. Jonas declares, "These / fees / will fall," gesturing emphatically downward in a demand, before Louw joins his voice to hers, and the two declare, "while we stand tall."  The transformation of the slogan from the imperative "must" to the declarative "will" situates the movement as an unstoppable force, its collective demands irresistible. Every word is emphasized, every syllable punctuated, drawing out the phrase's meaning even as the speakers' merged voices evoke the larger protesting public whose calls to action they repeat. The poem's conversational rhythm gives way to a chant in this final moment, a call to action and a claim of progressive inevitability. By directing their piece to the audience, and using a style typical of live interactive pieces, Jonas and Louw demand their audience invest in their message. The poem creates a community of supporters through the language of support it circulates. It becomes a protest in a poem, and a marker of affiliation on its own. Outside the

current regime, they nonetheless claim membership in the national narrative, and their direct gaze constitutes both a challenge and an invitation to the audience: join us.

In "Books Not Bullets," the phrase "Fees Must Fall" works as a kind of interpellation, naming a community into which individuals place themselves through their use of the tag. In this sense, the hashtag inaugurates an individual into a community while defining the community's structures and values. It functions as what Judith Butler calls "excitable speech," or speech which incites action without acting itself. For Butler, excitable speech is typified in the insult and the interpellation, each of which situates the addressee within a collectivity, without itself ascribing action. Butler writes, "By being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility of social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call" (2). The hashtag allows the user to name herself, to project herself into an aspirational community shaped by shared values, experiences, or simply emotions. Tagging a tweet, an image, a video, or a poem positions the object, its author, and its viewers alike in a conversation delimited by collective uses of the hashtag's unique linguistic marker. Being constituted within a community, and within the limitations of censorship, positions the individual to name and thus shape the community within which she operates.

The poem, in this context, offered a language of affiliation through which protestors could mark their support, augmenting the familiar songs of struggle that pervaded the protests (Goodsell et al 2016). It linked protestors both to the legacy of the anti-colonial struggle and to ongoing, global struggles for educational equality. The hashtag, moreover, literally linked the poem to the affective community of a national— and, eventually, international—protest movement. Separated geographically, drawn together rhetorically and linked digitally, the protestors found motion through the mediatized language of the hashtag. South Africa's Fallists show the power of a hashtag to call a community to action, as well as the importance of poetry in maintaining community support.

#THISFLAG: POETRY AS HASHTAG

Where the hashtag brought the community together and to public attention, its poetry reimagined a nation shaped by its supporters' interests. The nationalist message of these poems were central to their success: they sought to better realize national ideals, rather than break them down. Poetry and hashtags work together to shape national counterpublics through the development and broadcast of a national counter-imaginary. Like the Fallists, Zimbabwe's "This Flag" movement and Malawi's university crisis of 2016 reimagined a national future that aligned with the ideals and

experiences of urban youth. In each case, poetry and hashtags grew out of one another, but the virality of poetry appears most clearly when a poem itself produces a hashtag movement, as happened in Zimbabwe in the spring of 2016.

On 19 April 2016, Pastor Evan Mawarire sat down at his desk in Harare, fed up. Despite his success offering marital and pre-marital counseling, Mawarire had been struck by the country's cash shortage and left unable to pay his children's school fees. He wrapped the nation's flag over his shoulders, sat down in front of his computer, and delivered a poem-rant he titled "This Flag: A Lament for Zimbabwe." The three-minute video he then posted to Facebook quickly went viral, gathering over 100,000 views in its first week (Gukurume 2017). Later that same day, the poem was published to YouTube, where users debated its value and offered interpretations. Within days, videos appeared in response, with titles like "This Flag—Ireland" signaling the movement's transnational affinities. As the video's popularity grew, Mawarire organized a 25-day series of protest videos, each one airing grievances or documenting the state of the country. Others posted response videos and tweets linked through the hashtag channel #ThisFlag, and those responses soon dominated the conversation above Mawarire's original post. The hashtag linked a wide range of people across Zimbabwe and the diaspora. Their direct action, culminating in a series of protests and a national boycott

in July 2016, brought the Mawarire's rhetoric to the ground, while the social media

strategies of the protestors extended beyond the borders of the nation.

The poem's spread, popularization, and transformation demonstrate the

potential for poetry to frame national discourse and motivate collective action. Since

2000, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's ideological campaigns, in addition to his

regime's practices of censorship and political violence, had made his leadership a

crucial part of Zimbabwean nationalism. His regime, in turn, came to stand in for the

broader legacy of the anti-colonial struggle, so that any resistance to the ruling

Zimbabwean African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) was framed as anti-

independence. These images were cemented in musical galas and songs that "mediated

a narrow national imaginary that served to legitimize continued reign of the ruling

party" (Willems 357). Broadcast over radio and television, songs in support of Mugabe

created a ubiquitous language and rhythm of support for the ruling party. Mawarire's

poem offered an alternative vision of the nation, one which Zimbabweans picked up

and responded to in their own pieces before rallying together in multi-national protests.

As a poem, "This Flag" is revealing not only for its use of social media to

promote collective action but for its use of formal and performative norms to encourage

audience interactions and feedback. It crafts an image of everyday Zimbabweanness

which, in turn, offers its audience concrete language and tools for action. Mawarire

subtitled his video, "A lament for Zimbabwe," suggesting that the nation's story was one of tragedy and that his words would be an expression of his personal grief at the nation's fate. But in the video itself, he doesn't simply mourn Zimbabwe; instead, he offers an alternative vision for its future, providing hope even as he tears down the narrative promoted by Mugabe's regime. His refrain, "this flag," punctuates the poem, recentering his claims after each moment of heightened emotion. It is simultaneously slogan and prayer, condemnation and supplication. Like the piece itself, the refrain is simple, multilayered, allusive, and deeply hopeful, allowing the audience to find themselves in his narrative.

Mawarire's poem resists dominant partisan narratives, which imagine ZANU-PF as either the heir of the anti-colonial movement or a monothically oppressive power, in order to break through what another poet has called "our culture of silence" (Black Pearl 2014) on political concerns and frustrations. The piece's first half breaks apart the idealistic, official symbols of the flag, which project a rosy picture of Zimbabwe at odds with many of its citizens' experiences. Pointing to the strip of red dividing the flag, Mawarire complains:

> The red, they say that that is the blood. It's the blood that was shed to secure freedom for me, and I'm so thankful for that. I just don't know, if they were here, they that shed their blood and saw the way this country is, that they would demand their blood be brought back. This flag.

Even as he accepts certain elements of the national symbols—the importance of the flag,

the meaning of its colors, the value of memorializing martyrs—Mawarire rejects the

official reading of those symbols. His rhetoric focuses on the future he imagines for the

country, rather than the present he rejects, as reflected in the shift in pronominal power.

"They" who tell at the outset become "they" who have passed, subtly transferring

authority from the false prophets of the regime to the true martyrs of the nation and,

thence, to the speaker who imagines and ventriloquizes their responses, and from him

to the protestors who would take up his call.

Having vacated the nation's symbols of their official meaning in the piece's first

half, Mawarire substitutes his own. The poem's second half reclaims authentic

patriotism by reframing what the country could be. It transitions by repositioning the

speaker relative to the inauthentic, authoritarian "They":

> I look at the green and think to myself that it is not just vegetation, but the green
> represents the power of being able to push through soil, push past limitations
> and flourish and grow. This is me, my flag.

Accepting the color's official meaning while rejecting its implications, Mawarire

reimagines Zimbabwe's future in order to reconfigure interpretations of its present. The

piece evokes the country's post-2000 struggles with floods, droughts, and political

disaster leading to famine and rising prices. But Mawarire finds pride in Zimbabwe's

present as a site of resistance. Each of his symbolic reclamations moves the focus away

from Zimbabwe's past and depleted resources to its people—the green as "the value of this land," the red "the will to survive," and the black "that which we emerge from and shine." By focusing on the people of the nation, rather than the land of the country, Mawarire expands the power to "flourish and grow" to a Zimbabwean nation which exceeds the boundaries of the state. While the original "they" still hold authority, "we" are Zimbabwe's true resource—and, reminded of that, "we" secure a power to resist.

As it ends, the poem enacts its own central proposition, forming a collective "we" from an alienated "I" and "they" and thus producing an alternative image of the nation's past, present, and future. Mawarire closes the poem by calling explicitly for mass action:

> Quit standing on the sidelines and watching this flag fly and wishing for a future that you are not at all wanting to get involved in. This flag, every day that it flies, is begging for you to get involved, is begging for you to say something, for you to cry out and say why must we be in the situation that we are in. This flag. It's your flag. It's my flag. This flag.

The closing makes Mawarire's experiences parallel to those of his viewers and reframes "this flag" as "my," "your," and thus implicitly our flag—not an abstraction of the state but a possession to be claimed and managed by its people.

As a refrain, "this flag" quickly became a rallying cry. Mawarire's poem was so effective that its refrain was even adapted by his opponents, who rallied around the phrase "Our Flag" (or the hashtag channel #OurFlag). Online, #OurFlag was

popularized by then-Minister of Education Jonathan Moyo, who had been among the

most prominent defenders of the ZANU-PF government on social media. Moyo's tweets

declaimed, for instance, that, "It's #OurFlag, the #PeoplesFlag vs #ThisFlag campaign

founded & funded by #US & #EU Ambassadors. *Hande tione* [Let's see]!" (14 May 2016).

Even in Moyo's efforts build an argument against Mawarire, #OurFlag inverted the

common phenomenon of political resistors adapting state rhetoric to suit their own

ends (Barber 2018, Chirambo 2010, Mphande 2007, Lwanda 2008) to suggest ZANU-

PF's more direct claim on the flag. As a poem, "This Flag" builds on traditions of

politically active poetry in Zimbabwe; as a social media link, #ThisFlag builds on

contemporary organizing trends; and as both at once, it created a unique rhetoric of

affiliation through which a collective poetry of resistance could develop.

*Towards a Poetry of Resistance*

For Mawarire, poetry offered an especially apt response to Mugabe's regime,

which had co-opted anti-colonial poetry for its own uses (Willems 2015, Ravengai 2015,

Bere 2008). During independence struggles in Zimbabwe, music and song were used to

articulate the demands of the fighters and affectively draw together a community

invested in the language of the nation. As John Kaemmer describes, "Songs in the

camps also served to instill in the guerrillas a clear idea of the goals of the struggle and

the requirements of being a disciplined fighter. In this situation music was thus an

important means of mobilizing the energies of the guerilla fighters" (8). The music

reached out beyond the combatants to interpolate communities that rallied behind

them, offering a language and symbolism of support to propagate the cause of

independence. Stephen Chifunyise argues further, "This dynamic use of the diverse and

popular forms of indigenous performing arts, for instance traditional dance, ritual

dances, poetic recitation, chants, slogans, songs and story-telling, enabled the

combatants to mobilise the peasants to articulate their opposition to the settler white

minority regime" (54). Blending traditional rhythms and instruments with

contemporary melodies and lyrics, chimurenga music offered a neotraditional view of

Zimbabwe that promised to link its peoples together (Bere 2009). The lyrics themselves

helped define an emergent Zimbabwean national identity against the remnants of

Rhodesian rule.

Following independence, ZANU-PF used these songs to claim the legacy of the

independence struggle, and their musical claims have continued into the twenty-first

century. Writing about hip hop and censorship in the early 2000s, Wonderful Bere

argues:

> Taking its cue from the chimurenga music of the frontline, the government
> turned to music to raise morale in the impoverished country, publicize
> government programs and rally people behind ZANU-PF. We, thus, continue to
> see music used as a tool for communication and mobilizing support for a
> political cause. Even government ministers recorded their own music supporting
> the government and ZANU-PF. (71)

Indeed, as Chifunyise and Bere each lays out, the Zimbabwean state didn't merely co-opt this tradition: they formalized it. Since the early 2000s, annual national galas use poetry, theatre, song, and dance to celebrate the state. These galas frame contemporary events in the state's favor in easily accessible terms, to produce "drama that appeals to a wide cross-section of the Zimbabwean society as well as one that is easily adaptable to the theatre-in-the-round formation dictated by the structure of the Harare International Conference Centre where the gala is presented annually" (Chifunyise 54). They form part of a broader apparatus of state control—not merely suppressing unfavorable works but actively producing, promoting, and disseminating favorable ones.

The Zimbabwean state transformed artistic practice into political spectacle, a performance both of its power and of popular support. As Mbembe has noted, the use of spectacle offers the state "the vehicles, par excellence, for giving expression to the *commandment* and for staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality" (7). The *commandment* merges symbol and reality, creating and enacting the state's power through everyday power and spectacular performance. Mawarire's poem video builds on a performative image of the nation, one tied to the musical and poetic traditions that Mugabe's regime had appropriated. By offering an alternative performance of national identity, Mawarire invites a dialogic imagination of the national community, one that

depends as much on the citizens' performance of connection as on the state's

presentation of it.

*Building a Grounded Movement from Digital Poetry*

Over the past decade, as social media has shaped public discourse, it has enabled

artists to reach an audience at the peripheries of state censorship and exceeding the

geographic boundaries of the country. In many ways, social media itself—its

ungovernability, its supranational address, and its attachment to youth cultures—

heightened the threat of the #ThisFlag movement. As the movement took hold, and as

ZANU-PF officials derided it as both an insignificant joke and Western-funded

hogwash, Mawarire called for a two-day national strike through the hash channel

#Tajamuka ("We Rise"). Protesters organized their work through the encrypted texting

service WhatsApp, and they publicized their complaints and protest through Facebook

and Twitter. Social media was such an effective organizing tool, in fact, that the

government allegedly shut down access to many social media sites, including

WhatsApp, in the hours leading up to the July 6 "shut down" (Human Rights Watch

2016).[6] The use of mobile technology allowed the campaign to reach rural areas and

diasporic citizens typically excluded from national. The organizing channels

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[6] This move was magnified in January 2019, when the Zimbabwean government ordered state-controlled internet companies to shut down to avert rising protests. During the week-long internet shut-down, Zimbabwe security forces are alleged to have rounded up and abused hundreds of protesters and dissidents, according to a letter published by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (18 January 2019).

#ZimShutDown2016, #Tajamuka, and #ThisFlag, which spoke respectively to the

protest's action, its goal, and its symbol, trended on Twitter. They were therefore

promoted on the platform's front page, making them more visible to more people.

Protests continued on July 7 and 8, even as dozens of protestors were arrested,

banks and shops were closed, and President Mugabe called for them to stop, claiming

that Mawarire himself was an agent of Western governments (CNBCAfrica). After the

national strike, government attention turned against Mawarire, who was arrested and

jailed on charges of inciting violence. Threats against and arrests of politically-

dissenting artists have not been uncommon in Zimbabwe under Mugabe (Joseph 2014,

Ravengai 2010, Zenenga 2008), but Mawarire's international fame and popularity aided

his release, as people rallied outside the courthouse to support him (Gukurume 2017).

Following his release, Mawarire left for South Africa, where he remained for several

months after Mugabe denounced him further on July 20. While in South Africa—which

was, by 2017, home to between 100,000 and 2 million Zimbabweans—Mawarire gave

speeches at many of the major universities, rallying support and assuring students that

the movement continued.[7] Carrying the flag on his back, his movement across nations

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[7] Exact estimates of the number of Zimbabweans living abroad are hard to find, in part because of the high rates of informal migration to South Africa and Botswana. According to the International Organization on Migration Zimbabwe's 2015 report, "it is currently estimated that between 500,000 and 3 million Zimbabweans are residing outside Zimbabwe" (Ocaga 2016, 5).

echoed the poem's movement through social media channels, enacting the digital

cosmopolitanism of his political claims.

Digital formats incorporate Zimbabweans living in the diaspora, Zimbabweans

who have already been alienated by and in turn rejected Mugabe. By addressing

members of the diaspora, Mawarire's movement implicitly broadened the nation to

include people beyond the land governed by ZANU-PF. The movement's use of social

media directly enabled the participation of Zimbabweans in South Africa, Great Britain,

the United States, and Australia—many of whom organized satellite protests on

"national stay-away day." As Shepherd Mpofu has argued, in Zimbabwe and

elsewhere, "new media play an important role by acting as 'connective tissue' among

diasporeans, with some online activities culminating in social or political activities and

opening up restricted democratic space, while resisting state propaganda" (116). For

diasporic communities, as for what Mpofu calls "suppressed communities" like

Zimbabwe, social media provides spaces of resistance.

*Social Media as a Youth-Driven Counter Public Sphere*

Though he acknowledges its limitations in reaching the country's predominantly

rural population, Mawarire has repeatedly asserted that social media is both a natural

and the dominant form of communication for young Zimbabweans. In an interview

with SABC, Mawarire said that he started the movement on social media because, "for

my generation, it's a very natural way of connecting and of communicating."[8] From its name to its rhetoric, demands, and actions, #ThisFlag was a digitally mediated movement: its action was organized over Facebook and Twitter, its message spread through the same, its rhetoric consolidated on WhatsApp and YouTube, and its protests levied via international and diasporic appeals.

During the #ThisFlag protests, YouTube emerged as a platform of protest. YouTube privileges the individual, whose hashtagged concerns make her one node in a potentially infinite movement. Between May 2016 and June 2017, over 700 videos had been posted to YouTube under the tag #ThisFlag. These include Mawarire's own recorded statements, news reports trying to explain the events, and sympathizers' responses to Mawarire's call. Comments on these personal videos are nearly universally supportive, typified by verbal applause like "wow" or "kkkkkkk."[9] And where the news videos are nearly universally in English, and Mawarire's personal videos are in English with sprinklings of Cheshona, the personal responses tend to be Cheshona and Sindebele—as are the comments in response.[10] As speakers claim their stake in Zimbabwe, their viewers mark their own cultural stakes, as well. Even as the hashtag mutates with its many authors' varied intentions, then, its underlying connection to the

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[8] Born in 1977, Mawarire was 39 at the time of the protests, an age which places him within Zimbabwean youth politics.

[9] A regionally common way of communicating laughter online.

[10] Cheshona and Sindebele are the two most widely spoken languages in Zimbabwe.

poetry of protest and to the building of community inheres in all its uses, creating an overarching lyrical connection for its many publics.

Social media, and the language of the movement, appealed to an important sector in Zimbabwean resistance politics: urban youth groups, frustrated with the country's "predominantly gerontocratic" mainstream politics looking for "their own counter-publics, where they can openly articulate their socio-economic and political grievances, as well as counter the hegemonic political publics" (Gukurume 58). Popular personality Zuva Amanda Habane's video "Feeling emotional. Being tear gassed in my own country. #ThisFlag zw" is typical of responses to Mawarire's video. The video's title—personal, descriptive, and networked—reflects the power of social media and digital technology, which link individuals and drive the country forward. #ThisFlagZw, Habane's semi-idiosyncratic tag, puts the video in conversation with the ThisFlag protests, and becomes a direct hyperlink to sympathizers in the comments.

The video features a lone speaker, framed in extreme close-up, speaking directly into a camera which she appears to hold herself. She uses few gestures, except for emphasis, and directs her attention to a listening and attentive "you." Alongside its title, the video's form imagines the content-producer as an everyman, with access to the same limited technologies and platforms as her viewers. Somewhat unusually,

Habane's video calls out Mugabe directly—not for his failed policies but for his age. She

looks into the camera and demands:

> How do you run a nation with outdated—outdated minds. […] How do you run
> a nation when you are an old bag, an outdated version, and you actually refuse
> to update yourself. The world is going this way—the world is becoming digital.
> This is a new era. You need fresh minds that can work better, that can see
> better.[11]

The statement suggests that Mugabe's blindness to social media and digital

technologies mark his outdatedness—that the country cannot operate properly in the

modern, digital landscape with such old, "outdated" leaders. For many protesters, like

Habane, social media became not just as organizing tools but rhetorical weapons

against Mugabe, marking his regime as out-of-touch. As a gathering place for those

looking to resist Mugabe's rule, social media became a symbol for an imagined, youth-

oriented, democratic nation.

The hashtag builds an affective connection, creating a rhetoric of affiliation which

marks the movement's investment in the social media logics that link Zimbabwean

youth while retaining its attachment to Mawarire's original poem. The public mustered

by #ThisFlag draw on the hashtag's affective and cultural connotations to build its own

poetics of community. Thus, it was not only the literal linking capacity of the hashtag

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[11] Habane's video, in fact, moves between English and Cheshona as she emotionally recounts what happened to her. However, I have focused on the English, here, in part to capture the parallels with Mawarire's video and in part because of my own limited capacities in Cheshona.

which built the movement's strength in a country with less than 20% social media penetration. Instead, while social media allowed the movement to spread beyond the nation's geographic borders, the piece's lyricism kept it alive at home. The slogan "This Flag" was a deeply poetic one: its brevity, its repeatability, its allusiveness together make it at once poetic and broadly relatable. In its poetic malleability, it becomes an identity and a marker of affinity. As social media literally enables the building of collective action, its organizing strategies and connections to poetic logics are shaping offline movements, as well.

The #ThisFlag movement showcases how poetry can both produce grounded action and broaden the scope of national publics. Despite Zimbabwe's limited internet and social media penetration rates and expensive data rates, the human microphone effect of social media and protests—where each post and each voice becomes audible as people share it, repeat it, and use their own reach to promote it—spread Mawarire's poetic call to arms quickly, producing a potentially democratizing movement. The hashtag defined as shared a set of previously isolated concerns; it provided a rhetoric of affiliation broad enough to incorporate a wide range of sympathizers; and it created a literal link to bring them all together. Through the networked authorship of the hashtag, #ThisFlag channeled national anxieties, fears and angers into a single international movement—one mediated through poetry and linked through social media.

MALAWI'S UNIVERSITY CRISIS: THE CHANT AS PROTEST

Even in Malawi, a nation with less than 10% social media penetration, the strategies of social media protest—the emphasis on linking languages, on reclaiming the power of youth movements, and on popular claims on the national imaginary— shapes the poetry and position of protest. In July 2016, barely three months after #ThisFlag had shaken Zimbabwe's political landscape and a year after #FeesMustFall had first challenged South Africa's higher education infrastructure, student protestors blockaded the entrance to the University of Malawi's flagship Chancellor College carrying signs that read "#UNIMA Education For All, Fees Must Fall," and called for a "NATION WIDE CAMPAIGN." Adopting the language of transnational protest, the students aligned themselves with a global pushback against austerity measures. Putting the hashtag to rhythmic use in their own chants and protests, they used the threat of social media attention and global anxieties to pressure the Malawian government into rolling back the fee hike that would have further threatened their already-limited access to higher education.

In late June 2016, Malawi's struggling Ministry of Education had announced a fee hike from K275,000 (USD 379) to K400,000 (USD 551), about a third of an average Malawian family's annual salary. In a nation which had emphasized higher education

as the key to success since its first president opened the national university in 1969, the

fee hike read as an attack on economic progress and social mobility. In response,

students at Chancellor College staged a protest against President Peter Mutharika,

bringing the fees crisis into the public eye. Prior to their action, the *Maravi Post* and

*24News Malawi*, the nation's two major online news sources, had each carried one article

noting the fee hike; the *Daily Times* and the *Malawi News*, print news sources with high

market penetration, had each carried two articles. Following the protests, however, each

publication featured front-page articles on the fee hikes across multiple days, and the

online publications promised hourly updates on the breaking news.

The broadcast and print news outlets' coverage of the protests reflected the social

media logics of the protestors, looking to popular voices and even quoting Twitter in

their regularly-updated coverage of the events. Older media forms acceded to a more

intensive mediatization. This shift reflects a trend Philip Auslander has observed,

wherein "the general response of live performance to the oppression and economic

superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible" (7).

The adoption of hashtag phrases by protesters and the print media's reliance on opinion

pieces and blog posts alike speak to the pre-mediatization of protest and of poetry. They

also suggest the ideological dominance of new media discourse, which penetrate and

incorporate even traditional media and performance forms. As students compelled

Malawian citizens to confront the nation's future, they turned to a globally ascendant

media form.

In many ways, the university crisis epitomized larger debates about Malawi's

future. With concerns ranging from the abstract importance of education to the very

real sense that a government unable to pay for education would mean an economy

unable to provide jobs for graduates, the movement seemed to dramatize the nation's

deepest anxieties, its failures and promises, all at once. At stake, then, was Malawi's

future—and an understanding of its past. In their responses to the events, students used

strategies derived from social media movements, alongside poetic imaginations of

community formations, to transform traditional media communications. The students'

movement, which was largely organized through WhatsApp groups, brought together

protestors and their supporters through a shared poetic language and the urgent,

interactive logics of social media, as reflected in the offline hashtag campaign. The

poetry of student chants carried with it the Malawian legacy of politically resistant

poetry. At the same time, the movement reimagined poetry and protest alike through

new media paradigms, offering novel strategies for reinvigorating a legacy of youth

protest through poetry.

*Poetry as a Genre of Protest*

Politically active poetry is woven into Malawi's history, its legacy continually

evoked in government sessions, corporate board meetings, and even commercials. The

state's first president, Hastings "Kamuzu" Banda (r. 1963-1993), co-opted legacies of

praise poetry to craft a political image in line with his desire to return to an imagined,

neotraditional Malawi (Chirambo 2001). [12]  During the latter half of Kamuzu's

authoritarian rule, poets developed a rhetoric of dissent which partially protected them

from the president's wrath even as they mocked it. The poetry of the Malawi Writers'

Group—a writers' workshop originally formed at Chancellor College under Kamuzu's

own instructions to encourage the production of Chichewa poetry (Malunga 2015)—

built on local forms while making use of the obscuring tendencies of high modernist

poetry (cf. Vail and White 1991, Lwanda 2008, Chirambo 2001, Chirwa 2001, Mphande

2004).

Then censored and now canonical, Malawi Writers' Group poets took advantage

of poetry's ambiguity and layered meaning to produce an alternative image of the

nation's present and future. Jack Mapanje's famous collection *Of Chameleons and Gods*

(1983) used local imagery in conjunction with modernist structures to satirize Kamuzu's

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[12] Because Malawi has had multiple presidents named Banda, I refer here and throughout to Pres. Hastings Kamuzu Banda as "Kamuzu."

authoritarian regime to an outside audience, and, as such, presented a particular threat

to the government. Typical of the collection, the poem "Glory Be to Chingwe's Hole"

turns a geologic feature near the University of Malawi into a metaphor for the anti-

social depths of Kamuzu's regime. Chingwe's Hole—the width of a person and

seemingly without end—represented a social world operating at odds with accepted

practices. The poem, as Vail and White (1991) have argued, invokes the structures of

Chewa praise poetry, inverting its purpose and producing an anti-praise, print-oral

poem. In an implicit call to action against and condemnation of Kamuzu's corruption of

the praise poem, the poem closes: "Chingwe's Hole, how dare I praise you knowing

whose / Marrow still flows in murky Namitembo River below you? / […] / Dare I

glorify your rope and depth epitomizing horror?" (*l.* 16-17, 19). Framed by the poem's

titular "Glory", the lines suggest that glory is impossible and praises defunct in Banda's

Malawi: glory has fallen, along with the Chief's prisoners, into the depthless horrors of

Chingwe's Hole. The print text—published in the UK and immediately banned in

Malawi—was displaced from the Malawian community, but the national community is

nonetheless central to the poem. The poem's symbolic language demands pre-existing

knowledge, its form appeals to a commonly understood generic form politically potent

within Malawi, and its open interrogatives and direct address that directly implicate the

audience in the poem's message. It has become a staple of Malawian curricula, a partially depoliticized piece of national canon.

The poetry of the Malawi Writers' Group, along with the popular songs and dance of dissident musicians, inspired protest movements in the 1990s (Lwanda 2004), creating a political culture mediated through poetic discourse (Power 2010). Following the beginning of multipartyism in 1993, though, print poetry turned to more "universal" themes, with most poetry praising God, admiring the nation, and instructing children. The "newspaper poetry" which has come to dominate over the last two decades promises a prescriptive life: respect your parents, study hard, worship God, and your life will come out well (Kishindo 2003)—promises which the country's present circumstances, with an official unemployment rate of over 20% and 17% of all funds coming from foreign aid (World Bank 2015)—have failed to bear out.

In response to the decline of Malawi's publishing industry, much of the more politically critical poetry since multipartyism has turned to the stage. Performance poets comment on current events and bring up topics which would be all but unprintable in Malawi's self-censoring publishing houses, which many writers feel will not publish materials that could offend the country's conservative Christian population. Far from discouraging literary production altogether, the country's low literacy rates and much-bemoaned "dying reading culture" have led to a surge in poetry performances and

radio shows featuring poetry in English and Chichewa. Where musical performance

requires instruments and many people, and written poetry is unlikely to be read,

performance poetry provides an inexpensive and accessible avenue for mass

communication. Aspiring poets and rappers meet regularly at open mics and writers'

workshops. Communities of artists have formed online, as well, often moving social

interactions and poetic production smoothly between the two spaces. Even as poetry's

imagery has shifted, from obscure to transparent, and its presentation has been

reimagined, from written to performed, its locus and purpose have retained their

critical potential.

For younger poets, poetry's dual roles of entertainment and instruction are

fruitfully melded in performance, producing easy-to-follow narratives with highly

polemic messages, whether about proper sexual behavior, prejudicial superstitions, or

domestic violence. Robert Chiwamba, among the best-known young Malawian poets,

explained, "Whenever we need change, poetry can also be part of it, just like music"

(personal interview). For Chiwamba and his peers, poetry's connection to political

change comes from its everyday accessibility: while poetry performances may be

events, poetry is as much a part of the rhythm of everyday life as music, and its

interpretation need not be arduous. Nearly all of the most popular poetry in Malawi

falls into this conversational category, suggesting the power of poetic language derives

not purely through its formal elements—the repetition, rhythm, and attention to sound which generally characterize poetic form—but through its use by people. In this sense, poetry operates contextually, so that, in Gramsci's terms, "What distinguishes a popular song within the context of a nation and its culture is neither its artistic nor its historical origin, but the way in which it conceived the world and life in contrast to official society" (1985: 195). The popular, in Gramsci's terms, is marked by an attachment to the people, rather than to the state. As Karin Barber has shown more broadly of the popular arts in Africa, the popular is typically understood as an "interstitial category—neither traditional nor modern, but hybridizing both and constantly inventing new things" (8).

Popular poetry, then, is marked not only by its internal repetition but by its rhetorical repeatability; not only by its allusiveness but by its performance style; not only by the power of its language but by the power of its message; and never by the solitude of the lyric but by the engagement of performance. Yankho Seunda, a poet and radio DJ who runs the anglophone poetry radio program in Malawi, described bringing his audience into a call-and-response poem "just to get people along with your performance" (personal interview). Because of the low levels of internet penetration and social network service use in Malawi, most poems are first received in communal performances like the open mics Seunda runs. These performances join the poet's and audience's voices to produce a collaborative poem. Audiences deepen their emotional

attachment to a poet's message simply by being called upon to repeat it. In this sense, the poem and the chant alike are drawn together in a call-and-response style of collaborative production reinforced in hashtag channels. When popular Malawian poets declined to record poetic commentary on the university crisis—many of them citing fears of political reprisals or informal blacklisting—the chants themselves became the poetry of the moment, moving forward both political rhetoric and aesthetic urgency in the development of communal protest practices.

*The Poetics of Chant*

In July 2016, in the first days of the university crisis, students massed together on campus, physically occupying the space they risked being financially forced out of. Their collective chanting offered a rhetoric which could unite them and their supporters against the government that threatened their continuing education. Students chanted "timcheka-cheka Mutharika" ("We will chop down Mutharika")—both laying the blame for the fee hike at Mutharika's feet and suggesting that they, as students, would determine the country's future. The chant is structured as a call and response: one student projects his voice above the shouts and drumming of his co-protestors and shouts, "timcheka-cheka"—we will cut him up—and others confirm the subject of their rage, "Mutharika." A threat to the president's body, understood as a vow to cut him

down politically, became a way to confirm group commitment, of shaping group identity through a shared political rhetoric.

Most of the students' chants followed a similar call-and-response structure, with a caller—or two or three—beginning a phrase, and others picking it up, carrying the original message forward with their voices. Like protest songs, the most successful chants are rhythmically simple, with one dominant foot repeating; lyrically repetitive, no longer than four or five words per line; and sonically compelling, with hard consonants that encourage clear over-enunciation. In Felicia Miyakawa's words, protest chants must be "sung or performed *by* the protestors, not *at* them" (2016). Social media content production and reproduction mirrors the chant structure, as an originator suggests a possibly collaborative effort, its success or failure relying on others' willingness to build on it, to lend their own social and bodily presence to give it meaning. Such call and response forms invest the audience in a received message, maintaining an ongoing interaction as in conversation. Those chants which no one repeats lose the human microphone effect and fade on the basis of their failure to capture others' voices.

The phrases the students chose—"Timcheka-cheka Mutharika" (*We will chop down Mutharika*) and "Tinapha Bingu ifeyo" (*We killed Bingu ourselves*)—lend themselves exceptionally well to chanting. "Timcheka," for instance, is brief. It speaks in a collective

voice. Its rhythm—three trochees which carry across the call and the response—urge

the chant forward, landing always on an upward inflection. It has few repeating

sounds—tim, che, ka, mu, tha, ri, ka—so that newcomers can join easily. And it has an

empowering message, declaring a collective agency against which established political

structures cannot stand. The chant, as poetic speech-act, enacts its promises. The

collectively chanted "we" produces a counterpublic whose existence cuts against Pres.

Mutharika's power to frame national narratives. As "tinapha Bingu ifeyo / apolisi

anapha Chasowa" ("we killed Bingu ourselves / the police killed Chasowa") calls

attention to the state's failures, "Timchecka-checka Mutharika" imagines a future in the

present moment. The present-future produced in the students' voices grants the

speakers power where, politically and materially, they have very little. The immediate

future tense of "timcheka", combined with the historical memory of "anapha,"

produces an alternative narrative of Malawi's national structure and political

circumstance. In chanting "Tinapha Bingu ifeyo / apolisi anapha Chasowa" and

"timcheka-cheka Mutharika," students launched a direct challenge to Peter Mutharika's

government, reminding him of protests' specific power to destabilize his party and his

presidency.

While these chants suggest that the protest was primarily an internal critique of

Malawian governance and representation, other chants marked students' attention to a

transnational community of protest and poetic production. Cycling through the chants

was the inevitable English refrain that "Fees must fall." "#FeesMustFall" was also

printed on many of the signs they carried, alongside the more specific, "We say no to

fee hikes at UNIMA." The signs, like the English chants, were—at least partially—

outward looking. They occurred most frequently in highly public moments, as when

then-Second Lady of the United States Jill Biden attempted to visit campus. The English

chants and signs, in conversation with the Chichewa ones, signal a general engagement

with and investment in a regional rhetoric of resistance, spreading through and beyond

social media sites to produce a transnational consciousness of generational change.

*Producing a Social Media*

Even as it was primarily a grounded action, reported on and promoted through

offline mainstream media outlets, the protests of the university crisis built on the

strategies of movements organized and promoted through social media. Student

protestors worked on the ground, gathering in large numbers at symbolically and

infrastructurally important places near universities and cities. But they levied their

claims through an appeal to a shared national history and future, building on the

transnational protest cry "Fees must fall" as well as older chants from protests against

single-party rule in the 1990s. The students furthered the claims of both transnational

movements and immediately local imperatives through novel chants that evoked more

recent national embarrassments and suggested their position as intensely political

agents.

Unlike the South African and Zimbabwean protesters, relatively few Malawian

students turned to the frontstage public networks of Twitter and Facebook to voice their

concerns. Instead, protests were organized and rhetoric formed backstage, via the peer-

to-peer mobile messaging service WhatsApp. WhatsApp, unlike Facebook or Twitter,

does not directly facilitate the development and maintenance of networks. It functions

as an international, data-based SMS service, allowing individuals to connect only

privately. One of WhatsApp's main draws, in fact, has been that privacy: its end-to-end

encryption has made it a popular form of data transmission at hospitals (cf. Srivastava

et al 2014, Balakrishnan et. al. 2016, Escalante 2016), and among organizers of protest

movements across the world (cf. Gerbaudo 2012, Treré 2015, Pindayi 2017). Moreover,

the groups are private and require an administrator to add each new member directly.

Rather than the endlessly expanding network imagined in Facebook groups and Twitter

channels, each new member of a WhatsApp group is connected, like spokes on a wheel,

through their attachment to the central administrative groups. The social structure

imagined and enacted on WhatsApp, then, is an inward-facing one, and WhatsApp

provides channels for organizing and administrating closed groups—not publicity and

marketing venues.[13]

The students combined rhetoric developed online with grounded action and

social media channels to organize. But rather than use social media to publicize their

work directly, they extended its logics—of immediacy, interactivity, and populism—

into the traditional broadcast media that still dominated in Malawi. In addition to

spectacles that translated readily to television and radio, they gave interviews and

encouraged reader-response publications in newspapers. In addition to traditional

forms of interviews and news reporting, many news outlets invited alumni, students,

parents, and other university affiliates to "weigh in," presenting their remarks as

though without commentary. While, as Chapatula and Majuwa have shown, very few

traditional media organizations in Malawi make full use of social media networking

(2013), their coverage of the events accedes to the interactive demands of social media,

where countable interactions and constant updates are necessary to produce meaning.

The websites of the news organizations are themselves structured to facilitate those

interactions: the *Maravi Post*, for instance, highlights newness and popularity in the

right hand column, with sections dedicated to "Latest Posts" and "Most Popular"

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[13] Facebook appears to be planning to change this through targeted advertising, but as of 2018, WhatsApp has not been monetized.

embedded in the site's structure and accompanying every article. These forms, along with the Twitter feed embedded directly below them, remind the news viewer of her position as part of a crowd and in a highly specific moment. The driving paradigms of social media—popularity and recentness– have made their way into traditional media paradigms, and it is these paradigms that the protestors made use of in their work.

In his analysis of social media websites and their effect on information architecture, Geert Lovink argues, "Real-time signifies a fundamental shift from the static archive toward 'flow' and the 'river.' Who responds to yesterday's references? Time speeds up and we abandon history. In a 24/7 economy, we transmit tweets while the visible part of the archive diminishes to the last few hours" (11). In their efforts to stay "up to date" with the chants and demands of the protesting students, traditional news media accede to the demands of social media. The poetics of engagement which dominate hashtags and chants come, as well, to define traditional media efforts. Even as students chant their future power, their collective voices build on earlier models of poetic action to produce a new, socially mediated urgency in the offline Malawian public sphere.

CONCLUSION: THE POEM AS SOCIAL FORM

In Malawi, social media and digital reporting remain a potent part of the offline protest community's imagined public, evoking international affinities even as

individual chants focused on convincing a specifically Malawian audience. The

protestors' chants share a problem common to poetry posted online: determining and

defining audience. Chants, like hashtags and poetry more generally, are ultimately

open to interpretation and appropriation. Moving between spaces, sites, and

applications, chants and hashtags navigate a fine line between encouraging those who

already support them and seeking support from onlookers. Poetry's allusiveness

facilitates this movement, offering a doubled address that appeals simultaneously to

insiders and outsiders, while its presence on social media produces an alternative

community structure which relies on and assumes the mutual availability of grounded

and digital interactions.

Protest movements arising on social media use poetic language to move between

digital and grounded space, as demonstrated in the performance poem "Books Not

Bullets." Online poetry changes public discourse nationally and regionally to produce

new communities organized around a shared investment in the language of poetry, as

happened in Zimbabwe after Mawarire posted his recording of "This Flag." The

hashtag—primarily a means of linking online conversations—functions in these

contexts as both chant and poetic refrain and, as such, calls into being a community

which exists across on and offline spaces. As a means of linking, the hashtag is

primarily outward-oriented, seeking to convince marginal observers even as it links the

arguments of supporters. Poetry which emerges out of hashtags, in contrast, looks inward, reminding current supporters of the goals they share. Nonetheless, because of the human microphone effect of discourse online, digital poetic productions can produce communities whose effects are felt primarily on the ground. Even protest movements and communities which form offline and rely on traditional media have been reshaped by global moves online, as evidenced in the chants and publicity strategies of protestors during Malawi's university crisis.

In this sense, social media networks and the hashtags that link them offer not only a descriptive shift but a model which has rearranged older media forms. In his analysis of networked sociality, Lovink shows how the logic of social media has reshaped the presentation of traditional media. Even the websites of newspapers "display the most read, viewed, and sent content, and give advice on what like-minded users thought and bought. What is fascinating is not so much the flux of opinions, as Jean Baudrillard once described democracy in the media age, but the ability to indulge in similarity with others" (250). The "affective sharing" (Helmend, qtd. in Lovink 15) of social media may also become a figure for regional protest movements, which rely and build on the communal logic of national investment while imagining broader affective networks. In a viral context, as in social action, numbers create meaning. Viral poetry changes public discourse nationally, producing communities organized around a

shared investment in the language of poetry. The hashtag—primarily a means of linking online conversations—functions in these contexts as both chant and poem and, as such, calls into being a community which spans digital and ground spaces of organization and action.

The emergence of a given hashtag is the result not of one person's action but of the agency of the collective. Social networks operate on the basic logic and currency of recency, popularity, and repetition. They rely on the mass curation of the crowd, displacing the hegemony of content creator (Edoro 2017) in favor of the passive links of shares, likes and hashtags (Lovink 2011). The viral circulation of poetry on social media has produced grounded action from both immediately local and broadly transnational communities. It has called into being communities linked through their attachment to the rhetoric and world-making potential of poetry online.

We must therefore read social media platforms as themselves social agents, influencing public discourse and shaping aesthetic production. In the next chapter, I analyze how the communities that form around open mic nights and workshops instrumentalize social media networks to broaden their base and deepen their conversations. I lay out three models of arts engagement online—private online forums like WhatsApp groups, directed forums like Facebook posting, and the open authorship of hashtags—to reveal how the aesthetics of these platforms shape the communities that

form through and around them. Comparing a Malawian website's and workshop's respective WhatsApp groups, two South African poetry groups' Facebook pages, a Zimbabwean poetry slam's Facebook page, and a regional poetry hashtag, I argue that the digital management of poetry production has changed the communities that form around poetry, narrowing and intensifying poetry's influence on the wider cultural community.

CHAPTER 2.

*On Comments and Communities: The Algorithmic Aesthetics of Digital Poetry Networks*



*Figure 3. Grounding Sessions, an open mic in Cape Town, maintains an active Facebook and Twitter presence.*

When I first met Zimbabwean poet and arts organizer Linda Gabriel in December 2016, I asked her how she publicized the poetry she wrote and the events she organized. She told me she uses Facebook to stay connected to people she had met during her international travels, maintains these connections on WhatsApp, and publishes videos of her performances on YouTube. She relied on these digital networks, she explained, because geographically local networks are less stable. Poets survive on the strength of their networks, and in southern Africa, where survival requires moving into and out of

the country as the economy demands, having a strong network means not relying on a

fluctuating local population.  Instead, poets turn to the relatively constant connections

of social media, where individual users' profiles remain largely constant and where

even deleted interactions leave a trace in a broader network algorithm.

As rapid urbanization and population growth since 1990 prompted extensive

migration across Africa, poetry's communities moved online. College-educated youth,

who are among the most likely to write and publish poetry digitally, regularly move

between areas and even out of the country for jobs and education. The regular

circulation of people between areas limits the strength of geographically-bound social

networks. In their stead, digital social networks are flourishing. Poets and writers make

particularly extensive use of these online spaces, which maintain the immediacy and

connection of live performance, connect a growing digital audience. When I was in

Malawi, Facebook contacts helped me find open mic nights and poetry performances.

Each one, I soon learned, had its own WhatsApp group, which connected poets during

the week or month between events. The relative ease of publication on social media has

opened up new capacities for regular collaboration and communication, transforming

the range and volume of voices represented. The poetic voice, so long a figure for

poetry's artistry, blends with the voice of the audience online, evoking the interactivity

of performance.

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.

As Walter Ong (1982) suggested, and as media scholars like Jan Fernback (2003) have

since demonstrated, the advent and rise of digitally mediated communication has

produced a "secondary orality," a not-quite-literate yet not-quite-oral mode of

communication and of verbal artistic production that Moradewun Adejunmobi figures

as the "revenge of the spoken word" (2011). This focus on the voice in digital

participation is so prevalent that Kate Crawford (2010) has written a critical

intervention pointing to the importance of social media as an avenue for listening as

well as for speaking. Online, the voice—the individual's verbal participation in digital

networks, whether in written comments or recorded works—announces the individual

in an inconceivably large network.

As an increasing portion of poetic activity occurs online, the form aesthetic networks

take has shifted, as well.[1] As Dana Gioia pointed out as early as 2004, poetry's death—

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[1] My use of the term "aesthetic network" in this chapter draws on Eiko Ikegami's work on poetry networks and collaborative performances in medieval and early modern Japan (2005). In Ikegami's model, aesthetic networks consist of individuals within a larger social group who are linked by their attachment to and training in a given collaborative art form – training which allows them to enter an art-producing group. While the specific forms of aesthetic training and civic engagement Ikegami describes are particular to  sixteenth-century Japan, the role of in-group training to produce cross-class aesthetic affiliations are useful for understanding the nature of these connections, as well, though in southeastern Africa, the divides are more often geographic and generational than purely classed.

always foretold and never forthcoming—has seemed especially improbable since the

advent of social media publication. Poetry has been reinvigorated in so-called "micro-

poems" on Twitter, image-heavy poems on Instagram, and personal poetry on

Facebook. These poems, shaped by the aesthetics of their platforms, are in turn

influencing audience expectations about how a poem should look and what a poem can

do, promoting poetry adapted to social media's logics: fast-paced, immediately

accessible, personal, and interactive. On social media, regular engagement (through

comments and likes) and recirculation (through shares and reposts) ensure that a

successful poem will be repeated and renegotiated across many individual interactions.

As users comment on, critique, recontextualize, and even revise poetry on social media,

they build on different platforms' multiauthorial and interactive capacities to build an

alternative, extensively networked and intimately social, form of social media art that

highlights vocal participation.

Voice has become a central metaphor for describing participation online, whether

written or spoken, and evokes the sense of co-presence and participatory engagement

social media platforms solicit. Online, the voice becomes the marker of a singular

identity between embodied and thinking subject, tied to the idealized image of digital

space as "democratic." As Crawford outlines, "Not 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 model of "online democracy" Crawford would critique imagines

that each user has a voice equally weighted with that of each other user—a digital

imaginary that fails to account for the power of algorithms and gatekeeping to enhance

certain voices and suppress others. In this context, "voice" is simultaneously embodied

identity, projected beyond the body, and the ultimate metaphor for democratic

participation. In multimodal poetry, recorded and published online, the figurative

potential of the digital voice blends with the literal performance of the physical voice.

In this chapter, I follow the use of three different social media platforms, each of

which represents a paradigmatic element of each of three countries' poetry scenes:

WhatsApp facilitates the small groups that define Malawi's poetic networks; Facebook

use highlights the need to circumvent governmental oversight in Zimbabwe; and

YouTube evokes anxieties about reaching global audiences in South Africa. The three

networks represent three models of social media publication networks: closed

publication to closed networks on WhatsApp; semi-open publication to personal but

undifferentiated networks on Facebook; and open publication to an unknowable

audience on YouTube. Each platform is extensively used in all three countries, and the

divisions between them are far more porous than this chapter's structure implies. By

separating them out, I seek to identify their particular connective capacities and

aesthetic frameworks, but do not want to suggest that they are distinct. On their own, each platform provides an incomplete picture of each nation's poetic networks, but together, their differential use illuminates the role of social media platforms in contemporary aesthetic networks throughout the region.

Social media's unique union of communication and publication mean that, as media forms change, so too do the social worlds that support them. I therefore turn away from analyzing the production of poetry to focus on its reception, asking how the aesthetics of individual sites, and the shapes of their networks, influence the communities that emerge around poems. With that in mind, I examine the ordinary and the average of these posts—not those that most circulate widely but those that are shared closely, intimately, in the early stages of drafting and revising. While the close engagement of formal analysis tends to exceptionalize the individual pieces under analysis, the literary events I analyze in this chapter are not necessarily the most successful, evocative, or nuanced exemplars of their type, nor are they necessarily the most popular or influential. Rather, they represent the routine moments and interactions that typify contemporary poetic norms and networks online and in-person. Poetry has become part of ordinary experiences and affects online, where it enters the language of the everyday as the mire of social media collapses the boundaries between literary producer, consumer, and medium.

THE STRUCTURE AND STYLE OF MALAWIAN POETRY GROUPS ON WHATSAPP

As poetry appreciation, production, and promotion have grown among

Malawian youth over the past five years, poetry communities have become increasingly

dispersed, both across the country and internationally. More poets are coordinating

more regularly, across larger distances. As a result, and also due to otherwise

diminished publishing opportunities, WhatsApp has emerged as a primary site of

poetic coordination. For most of the poets I spoke to, WhatsApp was among the first

platforms through which poetry could be shared for public feedback. For many, it was

also the last. As poets move between cities, make connections through festivals and

social media with poets in other countries, and even leave the country for months or

years at a time, WhatsApp groups allow them to maintain and build connections across

national and local bounds. These groups enable newly collaborative genres and bring

poetry to a broader audience, because, as Barber summarizes, "electronic media greatly

expanded the potential public initially opened up by the press" (161)—not merely a

larger public but a different one, because "This broad, all-encompassing address to an

unknown, dispersed and heterogeneous audience required a new kind of textual

transparency" (164). Building on Barber's claims, Shola Adenekan has noted that

Nigerian literary forums supported direct conversation between writers and readers,

placing new demands on writers' time and potentially making them more constrained

to their readers' demands. Even though WhatsApp's publics are, in fact, private, its

ability to connect users internationally expands poets' potential interlocutors, creating

closed circuits within a potentially infinite network. It opens texts to constant

commentary and remediation, through near-instant editing, copying, and sharing. In

this sense, the text becomes itself dialogic, created within a potentially interactive

framework.

Every morning since I left Malawi in October 2016, I have woken up to over a

hundred new messages on WhatsApp. Very few are addressed to me: instead, I receive

a range of messages that signal, debate, and determine the current position and future

directions of the ever-growing youth poetry scene in Malawi. These include organizing

messages like "Kaya amwene *[And you guys]* ….. planning of publishing an anthology

of real traditional Chichewa poems with all what people are talking about in it …..

Zikakhala za recorded zi ine ndi *[Everything that's recorded with me]* content and style

based not adherence to strict rules and regulations …… These for me impede

creativity" (10/26/16),[2] as well as more utilitarian advertisements like "Oh so by the way

please like the [Facebook] page and share with friends and family!" (10/13/16). While in-

person events and meetups help establish poetic networks in Malawi, WhatsApp

groups work to maintain dispersed communities. These groups keep Malawian poets in

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[2] All translations are my own; all social media messages reproduced as closely as possible.

Zomba connected with colleagues 360 miles north in Mzuzu; with arts organizers in

Zimbabwe and Tanzania; and with scholars in the global North. WhatsApp provides a

sheltered space for debating frequent claims by established poets that the youth have

nothing to add; a closed community for developing new poetic genres; and a forum for

discussing their practice.

WhatsApp, like many social media platforms, attaches an individual user to an

individual account, marking a connection between an artist's identity and their work—

a connection often figured in terms of the voice. The classic figure of a poet's

individuality, the voice has become, on social media, a figure for authenticity and

authority. The voice marks individuality, allowing the poet to connect to an audience

and establish themselves within emerging literary networks. However, it has also

become synecdoche for democratic participation online. The common aphorisms that

suggest "everyone has a voice," or that digital media promise to "give a voice to the

voiceless," illustrate the rhetorical power that digital media communities ascribe to the

symbolic voice. WhatsApp poetry groups bring together the symbolic voice of

participation with the literal voice of poetry to offer alternative models of poetic

production that prioritize youth writers from urban areas.

These groups are quietly, almost invisibly, transforming a nation's poetry. To

trace these transformations more closely, I examine the specific interactions of two very

different, but broadly typical, poetry WhatsApp groups: the Lilongwe Living Room

Poetry Club (LLRPC), which is organized around a weekly open mic, and Sapitwa

Poetry's Artists (SPA), organized around a poetry website ([www.sapitwapoetry.com](http://www.sapitwapoetry.com)).

Observations are based on messages collected between 19 September and 29 December

2016, during which period the groups generated 2440 and 3134 messages respectively.

These two groups have similar numbers of participants and rates of participation—with

189 and 254 members respectively, and an average participation rate of 26.9% and

24.8% in the observed period.

Stylistically and thematically, though, the two groups mark extreme ends of the

five poetry WhatsApp groups I interacted with in Malawi. In LLRPC, members write

almost exclusively in English, have chats focused on in-person events, and rarely share

poetry. In SPA, on the other hand, members write in Chichewa slightly under half the

time, have conversations focused on disseminating information, and share or critique

poetry in nearly a quarter of conversations. Together, these two groups represent the

range of affordances WhatsApp creates for poetic participation in Malawi: from linking

in-person groups during the off season to providing entirely new venues for online

groups, supporting collaboration across geographic space and temporal distance. In

both cases, the WhatsApp groups filled key gaps in communication and group

formation, but also reproduced many of the hierarchies—poetic, linguistic, and social—

present in local networks. Comparing two groups with different network structures,

linguistic patterns, and topic frequencies reveals an underlying continuity: WhatsApp

enables individual users to create a network-oriented poetics that carries the voice of

the individual poet into a group-oriented, dialogic setting.

*Creating Poetry Communities on WhatsApp*

The connections WhatsApp draws across regions and maintains within local

spaces mirror those of extant social networks: because it requires a phone number, and

does not have a searchable database, it cannot connect strangers. Instead, it solidifies

face-to-face and one-to-one connections. As it does so, though, it reconfigures the form

aesthetic networks can take, and thus, the form the poetry itself will take. In Malawi,

this has meant that aesthetic networks are increasingly divided along class,

generational, and linguistic lines, rather than geographic ones. Additionally, the

platform grants administrators the power to approve users and dismiss transgressors.

This control manages the poetry posted in each group, giving users a template for

proper styles and responses. The shared understanding of their roles transforms

participants into an audience, who, in Barber's terms, "make the meaning of the text

'whole' by what they bring to it. In many performance genres, this co-constitutive role

is made palpable by the audience's visible and audible participation" (137). To maintain

the speed of real-time collaboration in lieu of the more direct participation of in-person

audiences, the groups establish close-knit personal connections that create expectations

of direct responses. Although WhatsApp poetry is not physically performed for a live

audience, the speed of reception and response directly engages the audience in its

composition, as does the feedback that follows. Finally, because WhatsApp primarily

supports text-based communications, the individual user is marked by their connection

to language as such, and thus to the voice, as the imagined mechanism of verbal

communication.

WhatsApp's always-on capacities create potential links between all users at all

times, and directly link particular users each time they look at their phone. Group

members expect regular participation on the platform, and because of this, the groups

spur a wider range of conversations than occurs at in-person events. Of those messages

that focused on poetry—approximately 4% of messages sent in LLRPC and 15% in

SPA—most offered straightforward support over critical feedback. On February 10,

2017, for instance, when a participant in SPA posted a poem entitled "Intense

Affection," three people responded within minutes: one with fire emojis, another

complimenting the "Zabwino *[very good]* heavy" poem, and the third claiming "John

wayambapo…" *[John has gotten started]* (*fig. 4*). Some groups debate current issues in the

poetry scene, asking what it means to be poets in this cultural moment, what counts as

poetry, and what poets should be doing. In addition to these poetry-specific

discussions, members use the groups to share and discuss regional news, sage or

humorous advice, and broader issues. The WhatsApp groups functioned as both issue-

specific forums and general venues drawing together individuals invested in one

another's well-being.

The groups are, then, part of a broader aesthetic ecology. They help sustain

artistic activity through cooperation with a wide range of networks and platforms, as

reflected in the different conversation and feedback patterns between the two groups:
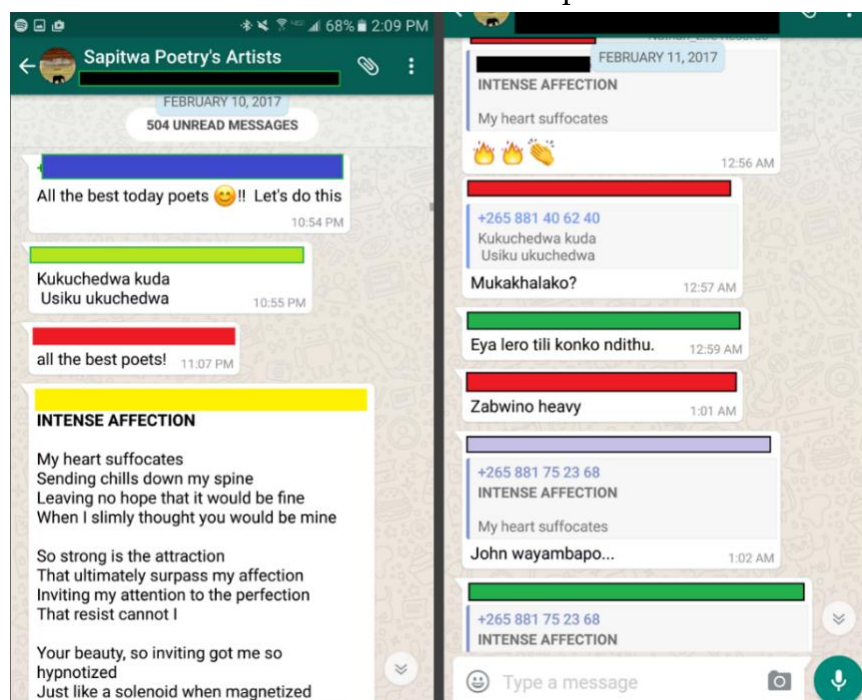


Figure 4. "Intense Affection" on SPA, 2/10/2017

LLRPC tend to share poetry and receive feedback during their weekly meetings, and

therefore use WhatsApp to coordinate events; SPA, on the other hand, is a purely

digital group, so their WhatsApp channel offers a virtual open mic, a space to share and

receive feedback on early work. In places where geography, economy, and climate

make in-person networks difficult to maintain, WhatsApp networks serve the purpose

Heather Inwood has ascribed to in-person events in China, "giving geographic shape to

poetry communities and generating aesthetic developments, one-off incidents, and

long-running sources of content that have in some cases irrevocably changed the course

of contemporary poetry" (115). The poetry of these WhatsApp groups, and the

networks they connect, mirror traditional networks and poetry, because the platform's

conversational structure mirrors traditional conversation: it connects individuals, one-

to-one, and enables both private and group conversations organized purely by time.

Yet the networks they connect are created through a shared investment in the

simultaneously digital and embodied experience of a poetic community exceeding

earlier geographic bounds.

However, earlier divisions have not necessarily been erased. Instead, the

platform's near-exclusive emphasis on written commentary has underscored and

deepened linguistic divides in the country's poetry scene. In Malawi, Chichewa and

English are the two most common languages, frequently used as lingua francas to the

detriment of nationally minor languages including Chitumbuka and Chiyao.[3] Yet

Chichewa's use is slowly fading, or blending with English use, as more and more young

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[3] Bonaventure Mkandawire (2013) and Reuben Chirambo (2010) have each suggested that Chewaization in Malawi – enforced, among other ways, through national education in Chichewa, despite the country's many major languages – has been a lasting violence of Hastings Banda's regime of cultural and political oppression.

people—who are officially educated solely in English beginning in secondary school—enter Malawi's poetry scene. Moreover, because WhatsApp's language settings rely on the language settings of the mobile phone—most of which do not include Chichewa as an option—its use implicitly relies on an Anglocentric infrastructure.[4] This infrastructure has encouraged an increasingly Anglocentric poetry scene and aesthetic networks, even though a large portion of the country's population speaks little or no English, and indeed, attendance tends to be much higher at Chichewa poetry events.

Language use is of particular concern for Malawian poets, very few of whom move between languages. Each of the fifteen Malawian poets I interviewed framed their language choice in terms of the sacrifice any choice entailed. Yankho Seunda, who writes primarily in English, told me that, "Our challenge is getting people to realize that poetry is a thing that everyone can relate to. […] Most people relate to local poets, 'cause it's in the vernacular, they don't have to struggle to understand the meaning behind it." Robert Chiwamba, who writes in Chichewa, was concerned that "it is hard, even for the Chichewa language, to go and recite in other countries. It's only for the English guys, and we are now encouraging them." To have their voices heard, both

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[4] My use of the term "anglocentrism" builds on Carolyn McKinney's coinage, which she has developed in her analysis of education and language policy in South Africa (2007, 2016). McKinney contends that the international dominance of English first-language speakers in policy making has influenced not only the dominance of English as a language, but also certain ways of thinking, including presumptions about monolingualism and the value of English as a global lingua franca.

literally and figuratively, poets need an attentive audience who can understand their language as well as their allusions. Malawian poets, many of whom say they feel alienated from the people they want to engage, risk figuratively losing their voice if their messages are not taken up. Their language choice marks their choice of audience, their particular poetic inheritance, and the possibility of remediation. It connects the individual poet to a broader audience, projecting or limiting their voice in particular directions. The poetic voice becomes a method of participation, a way of marking agency; audience responses mark acknowledgement, and that participation occurs in the context of the community.

While none of the groups I worked with used one language to the exclusion of the other, differences in language use marked a demographic difference between WhatsApp groups, and pointed to larger shifts in Malawian literary production, which is increasingly moving towards English and Anglophone writing. SPA and LLRPC, each of which is made up predominantly of young poets based in and originally from urban areas, represent this shift and its attendant anxieties remarkably well. On LLRPC, English dominated almost all conversations, with only occasional, stand-alone interjections in Chichewa.  On SPA, in contrast, language changed with conversation, so that responders would continue in whatever language the initiator used, and language shifts marked topic shifts. The difference in language use can, again, be traced to in the

groups' poetic investments and origins. Sapitwa Poetry is organized by Robert

Chiwamba, who founded the site in part to promote Chichewa poetry. Lilongwe Living

Room Poetry Club, in contrast, was founded by the poet Q. Malewezi, who writes and

performs primarily in English. Although Malawezi mentors younger poets in both

English and Chichewa, the Living Room Poetry Club has remained a predominantly

English event: on the six occasions I attended, chat and commentary moved smoothly

between languages, but over 85% of the poetry performed was in English.

In this sense, online chats mirrored their lived equivalents, ingraining patterns

established or promoted in face-to-face interactions even as they mediated group

behavior and enabled group formation between those interactions. But the poetry

produced on and for WhatsApp follows the logic of the platform itself: closed,

connective, and collaborative. The allusions are highly specific. Responses are rapid.

Pieces are short and easy to read. Though repetition is limited, quotation is regular. As

more young poets capitalize on WhatsApp's connective capacities, the networked poem

has begun to remap the connections upon which the country's poetry relies. As Mark

Andrejevic has argued, the technological platform reshapes literary genres and aesthetic

networks more broadly: "If the traditional notion of the individual

genius/author/creator comes under pressure in an era in which the collaborative,

networked character of creation—and its reliance on previous creations—comes to the

fore, it is noteworthy that, from the perspective of e-commerce, the work of authorship

is, in a sense, transferred from the individual creator to that of the application to

perform" (133). The platform has entered the process of poetic production and thus,

along with the author and her respondents, its authorship. The interactive capabilities

of WhatsApp—which allow users to define communal expectations, respond to one

another's poems, and create collaborative poems—represent a mobile alternative to the

face-to-face poetry and writing workshops which remain popular in Malawi.

*The Collective Poetics of WhatsApp*

Despite the groups' differences, the poetry they produced, and their approach to

poetry critique online, was similar. This is because, in part, each group constitutes one

part of a series of overlapping networks that make up the broader Malawian poetry art

world. Howard Becker's model of art worlds illustrates the importance of these

overlapping networks, which require the cooperation of many actors to produce

collective aesthetic productions and sensibilities. Becker writes, "Every art world uses,

to organize some of the cooperation between some of its participants, conventions

known to all or almost all well-socialized members of the society in which it exists" (42).

Those conventions simultaneously facilitate and constrain aesthetic production and

reception. WhatsApp groups rely on these broader conventions, but they are

themselves venues for developing and enforcing emergent poetic conventions. Along

with the conventions for proper behavior they enforce—no swearing, no gossiping, no

fake news—they also innovate conventions for poetic production and responses.

In each group, when participants posted the texts of their poems, at least three

others responded with accolades, complimenting the author on their piece or

representing their embodied reading experiences with emojis of clapping hands and

crying faces. For SPA, though, the real purpose was critique and improvement. Readers

pointed to specific elements of pieces they liked—individual words, or overall senses—

and debated if a piece was more interesting or funny, sad or serious. If too many poems

received only accolades, someone would speak up, decrying the lack of genuine

feedback and insight. On 14 November 2017, for instance, one user commented:

> When I was about to join this group a few months ago I was told that the people
> here discuss everything poetry and assist each other to become better. But
> honestly, I have not seen any of that happening here. I am not a pro. but I know
> there are people here who have the ability to dissect poems and show you where
> you need to improve on or where nothing needs to be changed. Should we say
> everything posted here is too perfect and needs no critique? I know we all have
> lives to attend to and can't be here full time, but seriously what's the point of
> being a member of a group where silence can go for up to entire day at a time?

Her complaint—which presumed, first, that the group would work together to improve

one another's poems, and second, that group members be active most days—suggested

a broader, collective understanding of the group's purpose and rhythm. Others joined

in, noting, "Mwina anthu amaopa kukhumudwitsana. Komano [*Maybe people are*

*forgetting how to criticize. However,*] the group is cold now…not as it used to

be…everyone for himself it seems," and "I feel like people, we don't love this anymore." The proclamations of doom marked the group's failure to live up to its promises and poetic expectations, suggesting a shared understanding of what the group was meant to achieve and fulfill.

Still others jumped in to suggest the group get "back to business" and host a "poetry cycle tonight," a term with which the group's 55 participants were familiar. When they decided on the theme of "Silence," 10 participants contributed stanzas in order, building a poem about "Silence" together. The poem included stanzas in Chichewa and English, and one left blank, representing silence. The collective participation in the cycle, and the poems they produced for one another, implied that the group has a common language for and expectations of poetic participation, and members regularly stepped in to correct failures. This sort of collective participation in poetic production, and in the production of group norms, works on WhatsApp because its groups are small—limited, as of February 2016, to 256 members—and closed, meaning that each member must have a direct, personal connection to one of the group's administrators to be invited. The presumption of broader social connections also moderates the sort of content members are expected to share, which can vary from group to group.

While members of LLRPC rarely expect criticism, poets do expect direct responses to their poems, and the group has a similar model for creating collaborative poems. In between their weekly meetings, or during the rainy season when in-person meetings happen less frequently, group members rely on the WhatsApp group to maintain connections and continue their poetry-oriented socializing. During one joking interlude in October 2016, a new member made fun of the group name (which refers to the venue where they meet), commenting, "Now write abt the deading room." Together, the participants suggested poetic alternatives to the "living room," such as:

> I used to live. I existed in love. I cut off my poetry supply. Now I suffocate in the deading room.

Or

> the dead suck out all that is… in the deading room …

And later,

> This invitation to enter, too tempting for my soul, but sitting in here, the flow of rhythm, the lingering melody, this tune of a song of wickied (sic.) evil masters, and lovers parade. I dance in this deading room, on tombstones of beautifully crafted verses, that lie unpublished.

Unlike SPA's poetry cycles, which feature lineated stanzas of similar lengths, LLRPC's collective poetry evokes poetic improvisation. Stanzas are written in full paragraphs, with line breaks implied by ellipses and dashes. Rather than the deliberation suggested by lineation, the punctuation suggests pauses for breath and thought. Indeed, many of

the contributions are highly repetitive, including one that begins: "For the love of the room of love, the love the room the love the room." The repetition creates a rhythm that carries into the rest of the lines, evoking the breathing room necessary for improvisation, manifesting the relationship between thought, breath, and word.

Building on vernacular poetic forms, which encourage call-and-response style collaboration, digitally-facilitated poetic production is defining new poetic genres. The poetry of these two groups—one focused on critique and the other on accolades, one on the production of poetry and the other on its reception—encapsulates each group's purpose, its rules and norms, and its leadership. It also speaks to the capacity of WhatsApp as a platform to host poetic collaborations, and to shape groups that want, write, read, and share them. As a messaging platform, WhatsApp grants no post or individual a clear status above or below any other. Tracing conversations, and separating the threads of a multi-conversational group, is challenging at best. In this seeming messiness—the lived sociality of the WhatsApp group, nested among so many other conversations unique to each user's social world—each WhatsApp group carves out its own poetics, its own expectations, its own civility, so that a poetry cycle that crosses linguistic and modal boundaries signifies within the social boundaries of the group.

WhatsApp groups' capacity for connecting mobile communities, for establishing

aesthetic norms, and for developing poetry's networked character is consistent with

broader trends online. The communities created on each platform cross over onto each

other, and into face-to-face networks, creating aesthetic networks that span digital

platforms, live performance, and print mediation. The collaborative, participatory, and

urgent ethos of social media platforms conjures the collective effervescence of

performance and spectatorship. Although they lack the physical co-presence important

to performance genres, they presume a shared intellectual and emotional co-presence,

one which requires listening—even if it is the distracted listening of a linked,

hashtagged public. The half-attentive, scrolling listener—one who comments on others'

poems but does not share their own; or who does not comment at all, but who

contributes to a crowd of numbers—is essential to the development of digital social

networks. These "background listeners," Crawford reminds us, are "critical to the sense

of affinity generated in these spaces […] the disclosures made in social media spaces

develop a relationship with an audience of listeners. Further, those background

listeners are necessary to provoke disclosures of any kind" (83). The silent audience

provides a reason for writers to write and a social world for them to write into,

facilitating cross-platform interactions and links. Poetry—whose shape is itself

determined by the boundaries of the network it addresses—offers a key form of address

through which imagined networks take shape. The voice then becomes a central

paradigm for marking sustained engagement with a fledgling, digital, aesthetic

network, and within the broader national framework to which a poet might speak.

SECURITY AND THE PUBLICATION OF ZIMBABWEAN POETRY ON FACEBOOK NETWORKS

Where, in Malawi, poetry groups use the relatively transparent sorting of

WhatsApp to have conversations in almost-real-time, other poets take advantage of the

uneven sorting mechanisms and amplification on platforms like Facebook in order to

tailor their audiences, rather than their messages. WhatsApp is unusual among social

media platforms in that background listening—or lurking—is generally discouraged.

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, in contrast, are broadcast-oriented, allowing

publication to a silently voyeuristic audience but providing little expectation of direct

interaction. On social media, the speaker and her listeners are linked only through the

tenuous networks of one-to-one connections, and through the imagined networks of

political and affective nationhood.

In Zimbabwe, a censorial political atmosphere has led dissident poets to

Facebook, a platform whose networking praxis and closed publication circuits allow

users to cultivate audiences sympathetic to their project. Occupying a middle ground

between the closed groups of WhatsApp and the open publication of Twitter and

YouTube, Facebook offers a relatively sheltered platform for Zimbabwean poets to

address a diasporic, transnational audience and establish aesthetic networks. In a

country where, in 2016, WhatsApp had been shut down to avert rising protests, and in

late 2017, an American woman had been arrested for tweets criticizing then-Pres. Robert

Mugabe, poets and activists use Facebook to air their concerns, taking advantage of the

platform's closed publication circuits and open conversational platforms to refine a

collective lens on the events. Facebook offers a dual advantage to these artists: on the

one hand, its open publication and built-in audience allows poets to publish work with

little intermediary censorship. On the other hand, closed groups and customizable

publication settings allow poets to determine who hears their broadcasts, and when—

within the margins allowed by the platform's algorithms.

Currently the most popular and widely used social media platform in the world

after WhatsApp, Facebook promises to create communities and "bring the world closer

together."[5] Each Facebook user has a personal profile, representing an atomic

individual identified through their legal name.[6] Users can create pages representing

their professional interests or hobbies. They can post messages, links, and multimedia

objects to their profile pages in a series of mini-publications which are then consolidated

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[5] The separation between WhatsApp and Facebook is more illusory than even this distinction implies:
Facebook acquired WhatsApp in February 2014, and several features encourage cross-platform sharing.
However, daily use appears unaffected by  this link, as Facebook's acquisition has, as of December 2017,
had little direct impact on WhatsApp's user interface.
[6] While Facebook had previously allowed pseudonymous accounts, in 2016, its policies changed to
require that all users identify themselves under their full, legal names.

in an endlessly scrolling newsfeed tailored to each viewer. Through this equality of

access, Facebook promises to create a democratic community, where each member has

an equal voice and is heard in proportion to his or her capacity to connect with others.

In that sense, it treats voice as metonymic of democratic participation, tied to

subjecthood and representation—a treatment which has become typical of digital

engagement generally. The platform's self-broadcast format, and options to determine

access on a post-by-post basis—to choose when to whisper and when to shout—have

made it appealing for artists working in countries with media suppression, where

saying the wrong thing too loudly too often can lead to retributive action.

The voice that Facebook grants is one that shouts, not one that discusses. The

semi-broadcast structure of Facebook—where individual posts dominate, and each post

creates its own mini-forum—reproduces the structure of earlier forum-style publishing

sites, of contemporary news sites, and of literary production writ large. Critics and fans

may comment on a poem or other post, but they never touch it. Facebook is thus

interactive, but not collaborative. It brings the market into direct contact with content

creators, but not with the content, whose delivery is shaped instead by the algorithms of

the platform itself. Each post is disposable, moving through the platform's scrolling,

repeating newsfeed to draw comments, likes, and shares—action that marks it as

relevant, keeping it at the top of newsfeeds and thus maintaining its audience's

attention. This emphasis on repeated, secondary circulation means that a post's

visibility is driven by repeated interactions and moments of reception. I therefore

consider two overlapping forms of content-producer interactions: the relationship

between poet and platform, and that between poets and their networks, or audiences,

on that platform. Comparing two poets' publication strategies on Facebook can

illustrate the relationship between the platform's aesthetics and the poetic forms it

promotes; comparing two network forms, in turn, will demonstrate how the platform's

network logics invoke those poetic strategies.

*Publishing Poetry on Facebook*

Facebook offers direct conversations with audiences who are otherwise

inaccessible, whether due to repression or to distance. In Zimbabwe, Facebook has

become an important means by which ever-moving, transnational groups of poets share

their work and seek sympathetic ears. It facilitates semi-open publication, allowing

poets to publish their work on the periphery of the state's gaze, and helps the nation of

sixteen million—of whom as many as a quarter live abroad[7]—maintain a network of

communication. As Shepherd Mpofu has argued, "new media play an important role

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[7] Because much of the migration out of Zimbabwe is informal or undocumented, exact numbers are hard to find. Most official statistics, including the International Organization for Migration, place the number of Zimbabweans living abroad around 1.2 million; however, because so many Zimbabwean migrants are temporary migrants or move under duress, it is widely speculated that this number is a gross underestimate.

by acting as 'connective tissue' among diasporeans, with some online activities culminating in social or political activities and opening up restricted democratic space, while resisting state propaganda" (116). For what Mpofu calls "suppressed communities" like Zimbabwe, social media provides spaces of resistance which distance and repression make unavailable on the ground.  However, the newsfeed gives Facebook's users what it thinks they want, and implicitly silences the rest. Facebook's free-to-use model, and one-person-one-account presumptions propose to give a voice to the disenfranchised. In this way, the system's algorithms—which can only be guessed at based on their effects—play a similar gatekeeping role to traditional publishing outlets: Facebook only gives users an audience if they play by its algorithmic rules.

Among Zimbabwean poets who turn to Facebook publication, some refuse open engagement for fear of reprisal. Others, though, seek it out to challenge the current political landscape. One of the most prominent dissident poets online is Mbizo Chirasha, who made a name for himself in the country's arts circles in the early 2010s by publishing two volumes of poetry and organizing a series of literature competitions, foundations, and blogs. In 2016, a series of threats and violent altercations forced Chirasha into exile. Since leaving Zimbabwe, he posted increasingly political poems on Facebook, daring his contacts to continue their connection with him. His rapid and regular publication of poems on Facebook, though, marks a departure from his earlier

published work. Unlike his published poetry, which features similar political themes but follows conventional typographic practice, his poems on Facebook skip lines and letters, default to phonetic abbreviations, and play with punctuation placement and lineation in ways that suggest the fast, often careless, typing typical of real-time interactions online.



*Figure 5. Mbizo Chirasha, "In Solidarity," Facebook, 12 October 2017. Reproduced with permission.*

Publication on Facebook provides Chirasha with a veneer of privacy: his posts are public only to his personal friends, granting him limited control over who has access to his writing. Despite this seeming control, Chirasha's poems nonetheless skirt the risk of surveillance, a risk-aversion common in Zimbabwe that, as Eldred Masunungure (2006) argues, resulted from "a process of conditioning over time." Chirasha's works therefore rely on allusion, requiring on audience's familiarity with the context to get his

message across. On 12 October 2017, a month before a military coup removed Pres.

Mugabe from power, he published a poem titled "In solidarity with those evicted from

Arnold Farm we all know by who" *(fig. 7)*. The piece's title recalls the eviction of an

entire village in early April 2017, by Grace Mugabe, who then took control of the area.

A day before Chirasha posted his poem, villagers who had planned to protest the

eviction backed down from the demonstration, likely due to intimidation. In the poem,

Chirasha writes:

> I was born along with this country
> , listening to the afro beat of politics
> Fist of slogans smashing into mothers faces
> Sisters raped in the reggae of propaganda
> Sons dancing to the funk music of violence, bathing villages in blood
> I was born along with country, listening to the afro beat of political music.

Written in the first person, Chirasha's poem highlights the speaker's individual

experience as the warrant behind his claims. It directly calls out the violence of the

eviction within the broader context of Mugabe's regime. It reminds the audience of the

implicit family structure of the nation—one upended through political violence and

reinscribed in the music of the country. His linking of the birth of his consciousness to

that of the nation produces an image of the poet as herald and citizen. His voice, the

soundtrack he writes for himself and his country, then shifts the question of voice to

one of song, and participation to violence.

This is not, however, the sort of voice Facebook will amplify. Chirasha's poetry, in many ways, rejects the form of participation Facebook recognizes—and, as such, itself often goes without direct recognition. His ability to produce poetry, to have a voice, thus relies on the listeners he can engage—and the network that enables and constrains that engagement. In refusing to be among what Bourdieu has called "the industrialists of writing," who "follow public taste and manufacture written words […] of popular appearance, but not excluding either the 'literary' cliché or the search for stylistic effect" (*Rules of Art* 53), Chirasha lost the search for a consistent audience on Facebook. Although his works—which are urgent, brief, and allusive—follow many of the logics of social media, they do not to adhere to Facebook's algorithmic aesthetics and so are rendered mute to the broader aesthetic network. Though powerful standing on its own, as it does here, the poem disappears amidst relentless scrolling and constant output on Facebook.

Unlike WhatsApp, which lists all messages sent to the group chronologically and unequivocally, Facebook disappears those posts which fall outside of its norms, making even small-scale normative shifts nearly impossible. Chirasha's posts rarely appear on my personal newsfeed, even though we are friends and have several friends in common. At best they appear in nested clumps, "Mbizo has posted three times today," followed by three clustered posts. The newsfeed does not reward the sort of rapid

posting at which Chirasha excels, and his audience rarely responds directly to his

pieces. Perhaps they never see them.



*Figure 6. Morset Billie, Facebook, 9 Sept 2017. Reproduced with permission.*

Just as Facebook silences those posts that do not match its ideal content, it also

amplifies poetry that suits its style. Poet Morset Billie's social media presence stands in

startling contrast to Chirasha's story. When we met in December 2016, Billie had

recently moved to Harare from the much smaller city of Mutare to work for Pamberi

Trust and develop professionalization workshops for young poets. In that sense, Billie

was a young poet working within the system to build a name for himself, and his

Facebook presence reflects that, establishing personal links between posts while hashtagging each post to mark his authorship. His poems and their frequency suit Facebook's aesthetics, allowing him to develop a network within its framework.

Using hashtags and shares to interact with his collaborators' profiles, Billie approaches Facebook's aesthetic networks through a linking strategy that directly positions him in a broader framework of digital logics, working within Facebook's constraints to promote his work. And he uses Facebook's emphasis on images and short messages to his advantage. He posts poems as image macros, the text grafted on top of an image which may or may not totally fit the verse: in figure 6, for instance, he has overlaid the text of a brief poem on a section of his profile's banner image. The cropped image shows a series of clouds set off against a blue sky, fading towards low-lying mountains rising into the background; at the center of the image, the poem reads, "In a morally dying society, / I refuse to be associated with / faked reality and staged actuality." The image-macro form would not make sense in most traditional forms of publication, but on Facebook, it renders textual poetry digitally visible. In that sense, poetry—as an aesthetic and yet networked form—bends to the shape of its platform, reproduced in social media's gaze.

In 2017, at 24 years old, Morset Billie had not yet been published in traditional print outlets, but he may never need to be in order to build a contemporary career.

Facebook's streams, which have no beginning nor end and place only the barest divides between media objects, make his poetry part of his friend's everyday lives as it butts up against status updates, photo memories, and news articles. As poets accede to the demands of audience and algorithm to make their post legible to a broader aesthetic network, multimodal pieces like the image macro are popular for their ability to interrupt Facebook's endless, white scroll. Whereas WhatsApp allows users to share images, recordings, and texts at their leisure, Facebook opacifies each interaction within its broader networks. It codifies platform-specific models of production and interaction, defining its users' needs and desires for them.

*Developing Poetry Networks on Facebook*

As poets adapt their work to better fit the algorithmic demands of individual social media platforms, new aesthetic networks appear, as well, stitched together out of the platform's algorithms, local social norms, and rapidly changing poetic standards. Like WhatsApp, Facebook connects users in two ways: through one-to-one connections and within broader groups, creating two parallel types of networks. The first form of network—which offers the sort of attention Billie solicits with his image-based poems— is the network of the scroll, the ubiquity of interactions that render in-person networks visible but do little to produce direct connections or collaborations. The second—the sort that Chirasha's allusion-heavy poems rely on—are the deliberate networks of

closed Facebook groups. These groups open local poetics onto transnational media landscapes, allowing poets to establish aesthetic networks for an increasingly diasporic nation.

The network of the scroll parallels the network of broadcast publication. While Facebook is casually heralded as opening publication and connection to those whom a publishing house would not recognize, it is in fact a vehicle for publicity only when all other outlets are closed. Those who have published extensively, or who are otherwise known quantities, post their own work infrequently. Instead, emerging writers must turn to the pages of the established poets for attention and validation. These gatekeeping mechanisms reproduce traditional aesthetic networks and ensure that, even in a loose network like Facebook, formal norms are maintained. Unlike WhatsApp, where styles vary substantially between groups, Facebook largely standardizes styles. It is both a publication platform and a signaling tool. By showing their connections, emerging artists also demonstrate their knowledge of the art world's inner working. Facebook thus facilitates a digital version of the sort of networking that might be happening on the ground, if so many of Zimbabwe's arts producers were not living in the diaspora.

For poetry networks to form, though, the platform must support users' expectations of mutuality—expectations which are incompatible with Facebook's non-

collaborative interactions. In that sense, Facebook's open networks discourage the

formation of fully-fledged poetic art worlds, which, Becker argues, would mean that:

> Knowing the conventions of the form, serious audience members can collaborate more fully with artists in the joint effort which produces the work each time it is experienced. Further, steady patrons of art events—those who attend performances and exhibitions or those who read serious literature—provide a solid basis of support for those events and objects and for the activity that produces them. (48)

Art worlds rely on the regular interactions of a smaller group of people—of a dense

network—which Facebook's openness does not facilitate. Even as the digital claims to

give outlets without gatekeepers, in the absence of networks, emerging poets rely on

established poets to confirm their artistic status and the quality of their work.

Gatekeepers become essential in precisely the space that claims to make them

redundant, linking seemingly peripheral figures and telling audiences where to go and

how to listen.

In closed Facebook groups, though, individual artists gain legitimacy through

their connections to a broader cultural network equipped to authorize and value their

productions. While the open networks of Facebook model the loose connections of the

nation, its closed groups provide shelter from the gaze of the state, freeing its members

to invoke an alternative network. To gain an audience, dissident poets need groups that

have an established protocol for allowing dissidence, which are open enough to allow

growth while limiting the potential for exposure. Their voices, in other words, require

the proper platform to be audible, and an audience that can understand them. In Zimbabwe's censorial political atmosphere, closed groups on Facebook provide a sense of safety and confidence akin to WhatsApp groups, allowing moderated publication to a large but theoretically knowable community whose commitment to political change may be presumed. Closed groups allow poets to post their work for a wide audience who, through their links to the group, are presumed to share the poets' political convictions.

Facebook's algorithms shape the communities and the aesethetic forms it produces because, as Norie Neumark remarks, "Voices need to be recognized as carrying (out) the performative effects of words, in Austin's sense. And on the other hand, there is an important performative quality of voice itself" (96). The digital voice symbolizes and thus enacts the individual's agency—but it only does so in the proper social context, one in which the voice has the power to act. Reception validates the performance of individuality. Yet to be heard, poets need a network that recognizes and understands them. It is here that Facebook's capacity to connect poets across regions and to establish aesthetic networks shines—even as its potential for exposure remains largely ignored.

One such group, "100 Thousand Poets for Peace—Zimbabwe," was founded and is now run by Mbizo Chirasha. Chirasha posts much of the page's content, including

pieces by other poets who have requested their work be shared in this manner.[8] On the

group's page, unlike on most individual profiles or pages, a clear protocol for

interaction has been established, and poets expect an engaged audience for their work.

Most poems receive at least two responses, often including comments as poetic as the

piece itself. The comments turn the Facebook page into something like a living poetry

anthology. Because of the closed, nation-specific, nature of the group, poets assume

shared cultural and contextual knowledge with their audience—an assumption beyond

what can typically be made in print, leading to the development of a poetic style which

directly addresses the imagined audience. For example, on 10 November 2017, a poet

writing under the pseudonym "Sydney Saize" posted:

> They need cyber security in a nation that guarantee safety
> Hero of yester-bushwar
> Are hiding word guerrillas
> Emulating to suppress speech free voice Masenga
> But who said Chirasha shall not speak
> Who dare shun Jambiya pen to streak
> The list is endless
> Meaninglessly endless
> Miombo shall publish
> Tuck will embellish
> The Zimbabwe We Want for peace

---

[8] The group's name refers to the Canada-based international "100 Thousand Poets for Change" network, which seeks to mobilize poets and artists under their political vision for "peace & sustainability." The network understands effective work to occur at local and regional levels, and works to support the work of poets in cities and towns across the world.

The poem assumes its audience knows Zimbabwe's political position, its history, and

the rhetoric of its leaders; about its political situation and constant threats of censorship;

about some of its lesser-known but still important poets, including Chirasha and

Jambiya; and about a broader Pan-African publication history, of which Tuck magazine

is a part.

These endless allusions do not obscure the poem's meaning, which is clear

enough. Rather, they mark a shared knowledge system, a presumption about what a

group member would know, and possibly an understanding that this poem and its

meaning are unlikely to ever leave that group. Though not every member must live in

Zimbabwean territory to grasp the poem's meaning or the group's investment, they

must all be invested in Zimbabwe as a nation, a political entity with shared cultural

histories and institutions. The endless allusions point to the value and importance of

audience-specific publication—a form which gains strength in the closed, semi-private

publication enabled by Facebook. Together, the poems posted and the comments, likes,

and shares they accrue, transform an affective network into an aesthetic one.

Facebook publication thus draws on and heightens the networked character of

poetry, integrating audiences directly into poetic production and forcing poets to

consider their reception. The platform's poetic networks—which are, ultimately,

interactive rather than collaborative, and which provide publication but no indexing or

contextualization—are creating a performative, networked poetics through which poets negotiate larger questions of identity, community, and national investments. The voice of the poet, then, comes to stand in for her ability to communicate ideas, to interpolate a transnational audience across many social media platforms and through diffuse networks.

BLURRING BOUNDARIES IN SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY ON YOUTUBE

While poetry on Facebook and WhatsApp allows writers to collaborate or at least interact, the ephemerality and closure of those two platforms is at odds with many poets' desire to archive their works and continually reach public audiences. YouTube has thus become a dominant site for the publication and circulation of performance poems from across Africa, and poets in all three countries publish their performances to YouTube with varying regularity. The voice, in YouTube performances— simultaneously symbolic of democratic participation and literally manifesting the physical body—reproduces the personal interface of in-person interactions. However, unlike Facebook or WhatsApp, the community of YouTube is largely atomistic: no mechanisms exist to create direct connections between users, and individual posts stand alone, with little contextualization.

In one video, two poets stand side by side on stage, looking out to an audience they can hear but not see. Looking out at the crowd, their words move between English,

Afrikaans, Khoi-San, and isiXhosa. They gesture backwards, above, around, their

movements incorporating the geological feature they name, the mountain that

dominates the 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

2016 Open Book Festival, I re-view the video recording. This time, instead of watching

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 the video ends, the website recommends another video, a

recording of another Cape Town poetry night. A poet, 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 performed a year after the first piece, five kilometers away at the University of

Cape Town's Baxter Theatre Complex, the two enter anthological conversation through

the platform's algorithms and the viewer's gaze. The video is mine to control, to make

larger or smaller, to slow or speed up, to re-edit with almost no technical knowledge or

poetic skills needed. 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 interface, which makes video relatively posting cheap, fast and easy, supported an international flourishing of performance poetry. Moreover, its emphasis on participation mirrors trends in poetry performance over the past 30 years, as the silently reverent audience of the mid-twentieth century poetry reading has been replaced by the loudly irreverent judges of the poetry slam and the individually empowered viewer of online consumption (Middleton 2005). This imagined audience derives from YouTube's promotion of what Marta Dynel calls a "mass-media discourse" within which "an audience member may also be a message producer" (39). Poetry on YouTube opens itself up to many-to-one interactions, framed by comments which stand outside of the poem. On YouTube, poetry relies on the power of its address and its allusive capacity to create its networks. For those poems whose meaning incorporates the site of their performance, the global potential of YouTube's audience represents both a threat to their meaning production processes and the potential to reshape the meaning of place—a danger and a promise these videos negotiate through

the immediacy of voice and the hypermediacy of video.[9] Thus, while the voice evokes

the individuality of identity and location, its mediation through digital platforms

creates a tension between the desire for local specificity and the promise of universal

accessibility.

Unlike Facebook and WhatsApp, which create feeds for individual users based

on the connections they share with others, YouTube is almost purely a video

publication site, with little capacity for direct interaction or collaboration. While the

audience for a piece on Facebook and WhatsApp is determined by the networks the

poster has already established with other individual users, no such network precedes

publication on YouTube. Users can "follow" video channels they like and receive

notifications when those channels post new content, but channels can only solicit

attention through paid advertisements. Even algorithmic connections between videos—

indicated in the "recommended videos" listed at the end of each viewing—are unique

to the individual user.  Each user's experience of both individual videos and broader

viewing apparatuses is thus disconnected from others'. Finally, where WhatsApp

poetry communities have developed protocols for critique and collaboration, and

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[9] In this section, I use "immediacy" and "hypermediacy" in reference to Bolter and Grusin's use of the terms in *Remediation* (1999). In their sense, "immediacy" refers to the tendency of media objects to erase signs of their mediation, to create an immersive or immediated experience, while "hypermediacy" refers to their tendency to flag their mediation, either by refashioning earlier forms of media (i.e. through remediation) or by using multimodal layering (such as the use of news tickers on television) impossible in other media. While the two diverge aesthetically, each, of course, relies on the other.

Facebook poets have the attention of friends and family, performance poems posted to

YouTube exist almost atomically. They are contextualized only by their title, publisher,

date, and view count. The literal voice of the speaker or performer, on YouTube, then

takes the place of the symbolic voice of digital participation to create affective

connections between past performer and present audience.

YouTube stages a fictional synchrony between performer and audience,

suggesting immediacy in a hypermediated context. The vast majority of performance

poems on YouTube are recordings of live events, the camera either positioned in the

audience or on stage, as often professionally manned as inexpertly handheld. Recording

techniques simultaneously sharpen the mediation between poet and audience and

assures the viewers of the poem's immediacy, of its reality and authenticity. Unlike

Facebook and WhatsApp, YouTube presumes no identity between each user's profile

and their bodily or social presence. In performance poetry, though, the performer's

body offers an authentic humanity against the anonymity of the digital. Even as it has

become a symbol of the individual, the voice is also a physical manifestation or

extension of the body and demands consideration as such. The performer's voice offers

evidence of reality and authenticity to the digital audience, for whom the shared

physical space of performance has been replaced by an anxiety to demonstrate the

authority and authenticity of the performer.

Focusing on the role of body, voice and place in the establishment of authenticity in performance poetry reveals the strategies that poets enact to maintain engagement online, to address the invisible and silent network through their direct address to the live audience. Performance poems posted online typify the anxieties of place and body which emerge in the movement between grounded and digital spaces, interpolating a broad, likely unknowable, audience into the experiential community of limited geographic space. Yet, filmed on-site, in-person, live, the video retains the feeling of immediacy and urgency that performance provides.

Through readings of two site-specific performance poems 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"—this section illustrates how the translocal connectivity of socially mediated performances is reshaping ideas about authorship and viewership, creating collectively authored poetic encounters. Perhaps more than anywhere else in South Africa, colonial legacies and experiences remain visible in Cape Town, in the statues of colonial figures and the English and Dutch street names that pepper the city. Confronting these symbols and names in their work, the poets' presence and the poems' present are equally and inevitably tied up in the politics of the city's space. Moving online, the camera translates the poem's spatial particularity to the spatial permeability of digital space, bringing

attention to the voice and language of the poem through the bodily presence behind the camera.

In turning to YouTube's publication capabilities and its large audiences, poets implicitly delocalize and detemporalize their pieces, creating a global address and playing into voyeuristic demands for local authenticity—concerns which emerge in the poems themselves. By comparing the live and digital responses to South African performance poems on YouTube, I argue that YouTube publication offers an alternative vision of interactive aesthetics, one which decenters the aesthetic object itself in order to empower digital audiences.

*Voice and Body in "Rondeau in Four Parts"*

"Rondeau in Four Parts" resists digital voyeurism by defamiliarizing language, turning it into teeth and tongue, rhythm and sound, the projection of the voice beyond the body. Where digital participation imagines the "voice" as representative of individual agency and democratic participation, the literal mediation of the voice in "Rondeau in Four Parts" suggests the importance of the physical, embodied voice in creating communal connections. The poets work across Cape Town's many languages to re-place and decolonize the naming of the city's most famous icon, shifting their voices—and, eventually, the poem's format—to meditate on Cape Town's violent cultural history and the use of language as power over place. By working across

languages, the piece resists the same linguistic tensions that are so prominent in Malawi

in order to suggest that voice can both reinforce the obfuscation of translanguaging and

yet bridge emotional boundaries. Language boundaries highlight the limited capacity of

mediation and translation to create meaning. The literal voice takes precedence over the

figurative voice of digital participation to communicate emotional resonances over
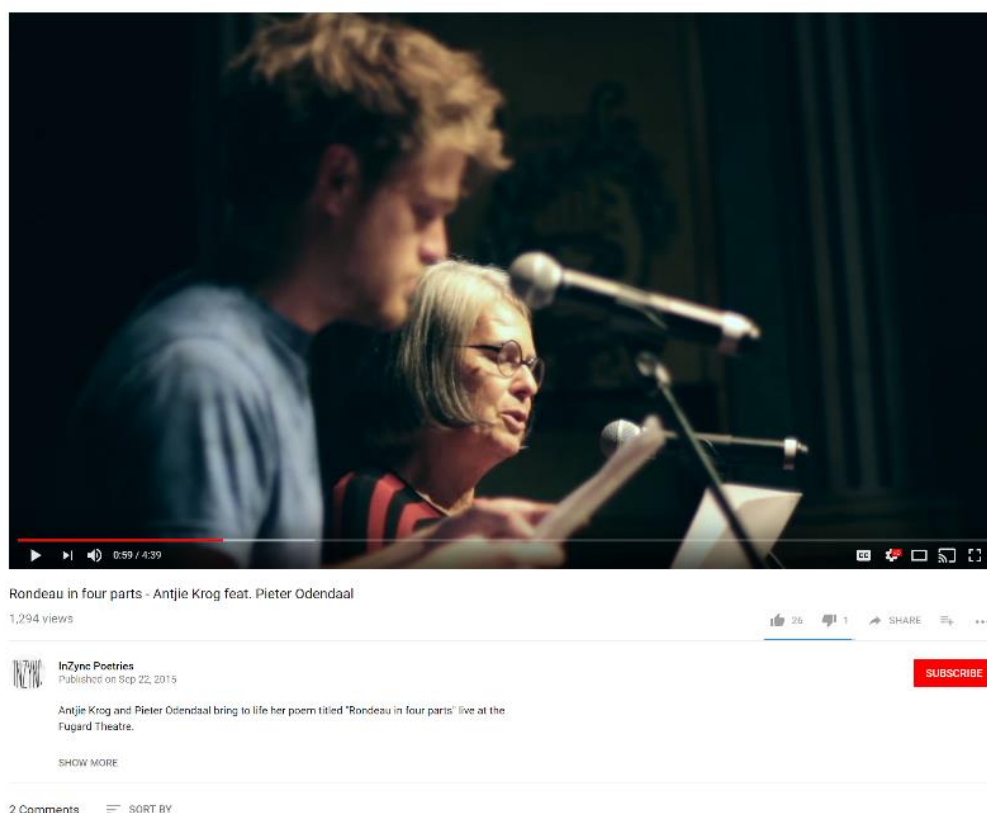


*Figure 7. Pieter Odendaal and Antjie Krog, "Rondeau in Four Parts," YouTube, 22 Sept 2015.*

linguistic meaning.

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." Before the poem begins, Krog lays out precisely what it does. Seeing the distinguished scholar and writer crassly declare that she wants to "fuck up" language's border-drawing violences elicits shocked and delighted cheers from the theater's audience, marking the video's "liveness," its immediacy, and integrating the audience in the production of the poem's meaning.

In its movements, which transform a repetitive musical form into an accelerating, crescendoing spoken word piece, the "Rondeau" breaks apart contemporary power structures and Moving rapidly between languages, the performance is a networked poem, signifying differently to each audience member depending on her linguistic ability and, through that reception, growing in meaning and weight. 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. 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 | From innermost outside |
|     die buitenste binnekant |     to outermost inside |

As the poets speak across one another's 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 staying well below hers initially, as in a radio

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; Umlindi,

the Nguni name; Hoerikwaggo, the Khoisan name; and Tafelberg, the Afrikaans name.

Working through each of these names, through the landscape's history of conquest

through naming, the poets force themselves and their audience to contend with a

history of violence from that extends from the imperial project through apartheid into

the present moment.

The piece highlights the use of language in oppressive systems while offering an

alternative, Babel-esque mix of voices and tongues which resist semantic translation in

favor of sonic collaboration. As is evident in Malawian poetry, such live-action

translanguaging is not necessarily typical of contemporary poetry. Through their use of

English, Krog and Odendaal address a possible global Anglophone audience; through

their use of isiXhosa and Khoisan, they insist on its local specificity. The text remains

impermeability to anyone outside of the Cape Town cultural context, even as its

performed translation offers the barest sense of its meaning. In that sense, the poets use

the affordances of performance—its multimodality and sonic emotions—to

simultaneously bridge linguistic gaps and underline their impermeability.

The poets' words and gestures are supplemented with audience engagements, which punctuate the poem's structure and create collective poetic engagements. The speakers pause for a beat between each of the four parts of the "Rondeau," giving the audience time to cheer, which they take in full measure. The live audience, carried into the piece through their injections, must confront their position in the theater at the base of the mountain itself, in the heart of the city's central business district. The digital audience, in contrast, are left with only the video of the performance, an audiovisual recollection which centers wholly on the delocalized stage, through which they must situate themselves and their commercial and potentially colonizing gaze. Like the poems Zimbabwean poets post to Facebook, "Rondeau in Four Parts" implicitly addresses an audience intimately familiar with its particular sociohistorical context, using allusion and opacity to manage access. Unlike those pieces, though, the YouTube poem cannot fully know nor address its digital audience. Instead, the poets' and audience's voices create an entry point for a broader audience. 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 coevalness.

Unlike WhatsApp and Facebook poetry groups, which encourage collaborative imagination in online social settings, the performance poem ossifies on YouTube's static

platform, which empowers viewers to comment but does not enable them to directly

engage. Instead, as Neumark has proposed, the voice marks the limits of YouTube's

participatory imagination, refusing its 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, so that what haunts
> digital media is the performativity of the voice. (97)

The voice, for Neumark among others, carries traces of physical location that the digital

space would refuse or negate. On YouTube, the voice remains a haunting mark of the

medium's limitations, a lingering bodily presence that underscores the distance

between producer and consumer, the limitations of the site's participatory imagination.

Even as the voice's vibrations bring the performer's body and space onto YouTube,

though, they do so only in the loosest sense. Instead, it is the bodily presence of the

videographer and the image of the performer that mark the video's immediacy,

bringing the body onto the screen and into the production of the video itself.

The performer's voice carries authorship into performance, bringing sound and

life to the text of the poem. It invokes the imagined link between live performer and

poetic speaker that Peter Middleton has demonstrated is central to poetry readings. In

this way, the social media poem takes on a performative lens, as audience and platform

alike shape the poem's meaning and ensure its continued resonances with the world beyond its immediate performance space. Displaced onto YouTube, the interpretation of performance loses its communality. Instead, poets on YouTube must address their in-person audiences in order to invent a digital viewership. The imagined live audience connects the isolated digital viewer to a broader community of address. The seeming intimacy of author and audience online has encouraged an aesthetic of common conversation, one which invokes the 30-year-old genre of slam poetry—a genre which has found incredible support and popularity on YouTube.[10] Slam's anxiety about and investment in authenticity, its utopian positioning, and its association with youth politics, all mark its engagements with a digitally-mediated cultural shift.

*Voice as Representation in "Apartheid Rags"*

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 voices may even overtake the poets' originating sequence. Poets therefore play with the norms of the genre and of its circulation to precipitate audience expectations and interactions. As Barber has argued of conversational and literary genres alike, "Genre is the key to relations between text and social world, for the form of the genre is the bearer of social relations within the text, and at the same time the route through which the text

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[10] I discuss slam poetry and its spread throughout southeastern Africa in detail in chapter 3 of this project.

recreates social relations via its influence on the reader" (41). The genre, in Barber's

terms, frames a text's meaning, enabling mutual understanding between speaker and

audience. In the closed and semi-closed publication circuits of WhatsApp and

Facebook, communities negotiate poetic meaning and expectations; on YouTube,

however, poets must accede to broader, pre-existing ideas about genre, often adapting

foreign genres and reshaping them online. The social elements of YouTube's media

formats then offer a way of negotiating publication spaces online. Slam poets, then, use

the form's language and rhythms to build a community of sympathetic listeners online.

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.  Planned on WhatsApp and advertised on Facebook, these

events draw on local networks to create a live audience. Innovating on the norms of

spoken word events, Lingua Franca's Naked Word Sessions have been held monthly

since 2012 in the small, basement venue of the University of Cape Town's prestigious

Baxter theater complex. Unlike standard open mic nights, the Naked Word Sessions

feature a performance collective who decide on a theme and rhythm in advance, telling

a shared message through their individual stories. Several of these performances were

recorded by the news outlet LiveSA and posted to YouTube. As transplatform events

which cross social media and geographic lines, the performances did not uniquely

address the audience at the Baxter. They also interpellated an online audience who

would view the videos after the fact and were themselves attuned to global trends in

poetry performance particular to slam poetry forms. Like Facebook poets publishing

pieces on their professional pages, the YouTube poem mediates between the platform's

demands and the lived aesthetics of performance.

In the video, the evening becomes a media event, structured by the

announcement-style "LiveSA" heading and intermittent subheadings identifying the

speaker. The video's hypermediated style renders the piece legible on YouTube's

platform, which provides little obvious space for contextualization. The video's

subheadings single out each poet who stands to perform, disconnecting them from the

collective of performers. But unlike traditional slam evenings, the Naked Word sessions

were collaborative, with individual poems linked thematically and musically during the

performance itself. The music marks a continuity upheld in the voices and rhythms of

the poets, making their poems into a collective performance.[11] Music, as alternative MC,

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[11] Molebatsiv and d'Abdon (2009) argue that multimodal minglings are common in twenty-first century South African youth poetry.

breaks down the media event's structure, forcing the digital and physical audience alike

to engage the poetry themselves.
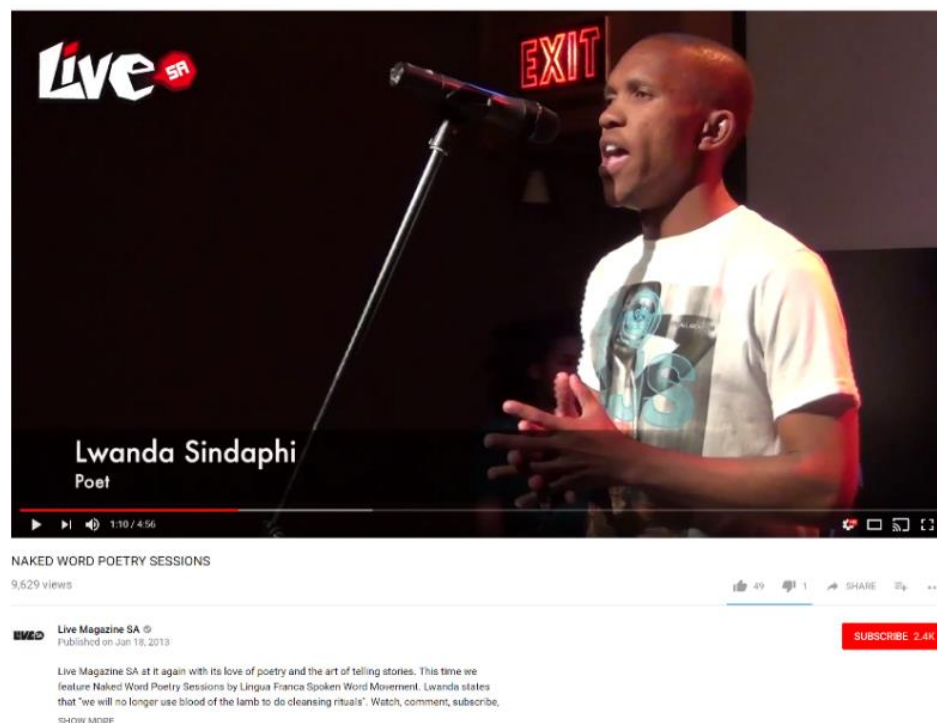


*Figure 8. . Lwanda Sindaphi, Naked Word Poetry Sessions, 16 Jan 2013*

The relationship between music and poetry is clear from the first performance, as

poet and director Lwanda Sindaphi steps out of the collective, towards the microphone,

and stands still. The singers behind him intone, "vivi se la"—dawn is here—while he

stands on stage, nodding his head in time to the music and begins:

The blood of the lamb will no longer be used in the future 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 deals with a familiar topic in South African poetry: the issue of land rights and their restitution to native people. His language implicitly tied race, heritage, indigeneity, and foreignness to landedness—all issues associated with debates around land rights in South Africa. However, his rhythm stands out, even above the specific language of the poem, so that the sounds of "stone and sand", of "soil" and "sons," and the hard consonants of "dead", "hidden," "brown", "black," "gods," and "guide," create a deeper sonic connection layered on top of the semantic logic. These plosive sounds bring attention to the poet's voice, emphasizing the physical components of speech-making even as he 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 to include his audience and implicate the broader world, those who would watch online in an unknowable future. Opening his arms wide, he declares: "Hence I cage my spirit in solitude / and solemnize indigenous rhythms, baptisms, weaving a new fabric, new clothes, to cover rags worn by this African continent." The introduction of the first person integrates the audience into his statement. As Sindaphi's address turns personal, he creates a collective poetics through which he can address and implicate his digital viewers. His broad initial gestures incorporate a global indigeneity, but narrow to a soft chest thump, identifying himself with the African continent— and invoking a digital

audience through the recording devices onstage. The poem signifies through these

connections and evocations, creating an addressed community which integrates the live

audience but extends beyond them, to implicate anyone paying attention.

As he finishes his poem, Sindaphi stands back from the microphone,

symbolically ceding his place as lead performer and rejoining the collective from which

he has emerged, reforming the whole before the next performer takes the stage. Yet the

video through which the event has been recorded and remediated instead focuses on

the speaker or the audience, dividing them and denying the collectivity Naked Word

creates. The collaborative imaginary of the event comes into tension with the logic and

aesthetics of YouTube's platform. The most effect a YouTube audience member can

have is through comments, which are radically separated from the piece itself. 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 people entering the arena, 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 their performance.

The hypermediated visual overlay and dramatic opening sequences produce a

poetry performance video structured through commercial productions. Posted online,

the poem becomes both an object of cultural consumption and an event for each of its

consumers in sequence. 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,

though, 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. The poem's

decentered, distant audience, together with their control over its playback, gain

newfound power over its recontextualization and rereading—but never over its content.

CONCLUSION: ON THE SOCIAL NETWORKS OF POETRY

Even as the words and sounds are preserved in digital publication, the poem's

online life yields an alternative, more diffuse structure of engagement which empowers

the individual viewer to produce her own poetic community. The producer-audience

binary collapses online, creating a virtual co-authorship which reflects the growing

networks of poetic production globally. Adenekan reminds us that, "as more and more

Africans gain access to digital space, the new media, unlike the old, are enabling

literature to reach more Africans than ever before. Moreover, 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). The audience of the online text is

simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, a networked audience to whom the poet

must speak. Poetry's networked address, its ability to create connections across

networks, then comes to the fore when we consider the influence of publication

platforms on the forms poetry takes. For poets in southeastern Africa, social media

platforms provide alternative methods of publication, allowing writers to speak directly

to local audiences and forging alternative aesthetic models. These new author-audience

networks and feedback loops facilitate the formation of transnational, mobile poetic

networks, which may operate at the periphery of the state's gaze.

These comingled publication platforms carry the logics of social media with and

through them. They privilege interactivity and direct address, multimodal signification,

and urgency, creating an imagined collaboration between writer and receiver that is

mediated only by the algorithms of the platform itself. They also facilitate the formation

of novel literary communities and aesthetic networks—networks which may, in turn,

influence broader behavioral patterns. As producer and consumer merge and mingle

online, poetry—as a networked form—has taken center stage, producing

multiauthored, multimodal literary forms and networks. Social media platforms are the

dominant publication site for poetry from Africa, and poetry which crosses media

channels opens new configurations of poetry-audience relationships. The publication of

performance poetry on YouTube challenges ideas about the ephemerality of

performance, bringing the possibility of transnational eyes into the original space of performance but weakening the strength of individual poets to manage their audiences. On Facebook, publication options and the problem of in-person networks allow poets to solicit sympathetic eyes while, potentially, disengaging from others. All of these networks rely, ultimately, on the immediate, face-to-face interactions of local poetry workshops, festivals, and readings—connections most directly maintained by poetry sharing and critique on WhatsApp, which joins together dispersed poetry communities, allowing them to debate and shape new genres.

Together, these platforms have shifted poetry's networked forms, blurring the line between poet and audience and informing the development of novel literary products. Through allusion, repetition, and address, social media platforms integrate audience expectations and network aesthetics into the work prior to its production, further blurring the divide between creator and receiver. Having shown how poets modulate their pieces for an imagined audience on a digital platform, I turn in the next chapter to examine how the aesthetic norms of social media platforms manifest in spread of specific poetic genres. I trace the spread of slam poetry through institutional, individual, and digital networks to argue that social media's aesthetic norms—which emphasize urgency, populism, and interactivity—are shaping live performance norms across the region.

CHAPTER 3.

## On Poems and Memes: Slam Poetry's Institutionalization and the Production of a Regional Poetry Network
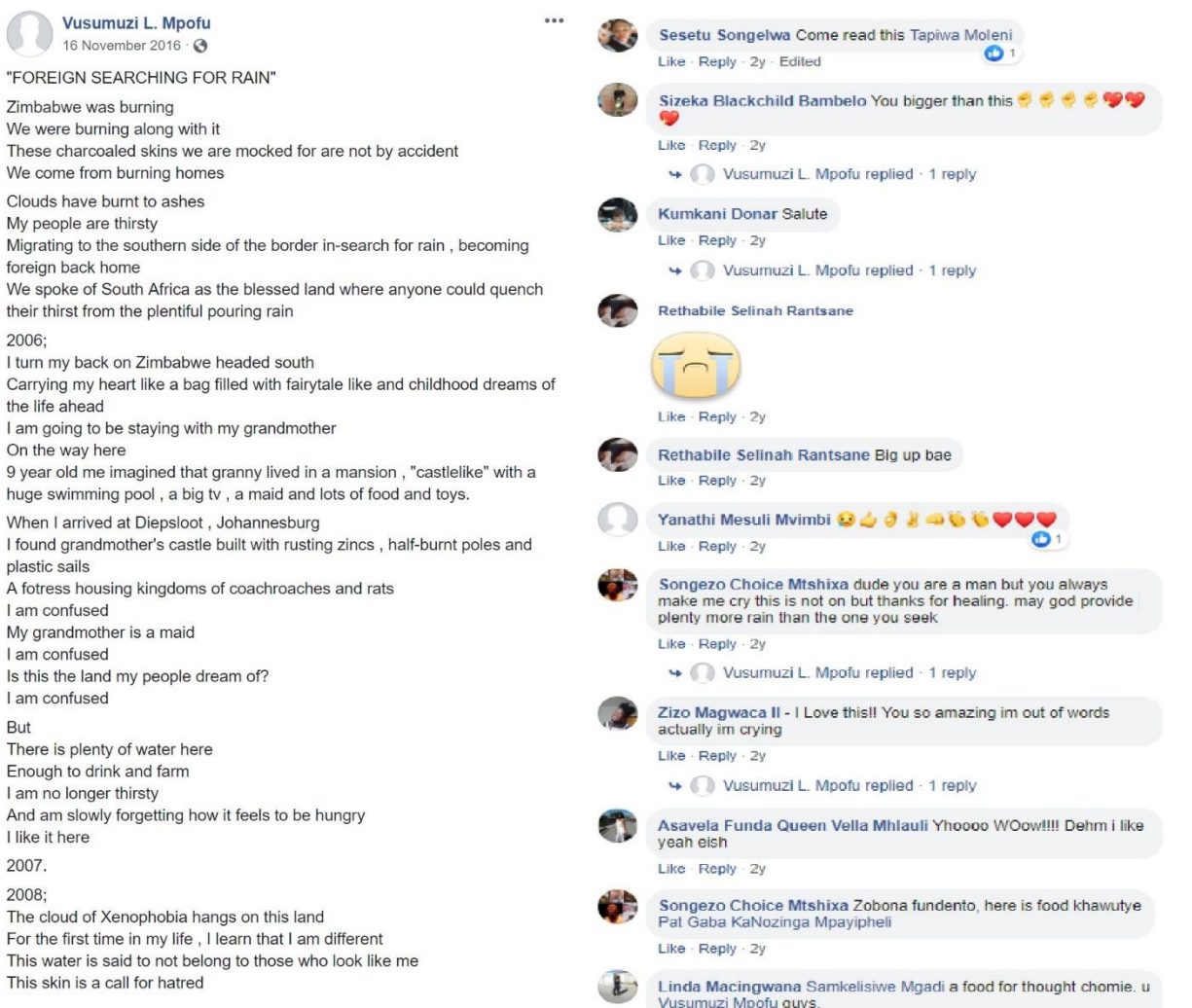


*Figure 9. Vusumuzi Mpofu, "Foreign Searching for Rain." Published to Facebook 16 Nov 2016. Reproduced with permission.*

In late 2016, the young Zimbabwean-South African poet Vusumuzi Mpofu

posted the text of a poem entitled "Foreign Searching for Rain" to his personal

Facebook page *(fig. 9)*. The poem uses Mpofu's story—of economic displacement, of

castle dreams fading into shanty realities, of literal famine and metaphoric drought—to

trace the joint history of Zimbabwe's failing economy and South Africa's growing

xenophobia. Online, the post drew dozens of likes, comments, and shares in its first

day, as Mpofu's friends spread it across their respective social networks. By the time

Mpofu performed the poem live at an open mic six days later, his audience knew it well

enough that they responded in expectation of upcoming lines. Several people audibly

gasped after the simple set up, "I leave Johannesburg, traveling further south, to Cape

Town," as they anticipated the emotional follow-up: "My mother's presence calms the

storm in me. She is a home in motion, housing the broken boy." Together with many of

Mpofu's friends and fans that night, I experienced the performance as a digital piece

come to life, and our shared knowledge of it drew us together in sympathy with the

performer. Lines which carried little weight on their own became fraught with emotion

as we anticipated what was to come. The poem's digital life had molded its meaning

prior to its performance, shaping its audience into a community linked through

Mpofu's words.

The production, circulation, and reception of Mpofu's poem—inspired by slam

poets on YouTube, developed in local workshops, published on social media,

performed at small open mics, and now published as a poetry video on YouTube—

speaks to the importance of transmedia encounters and critique in producing a regional,

and even global, poetry genre and style. The poem's style—conversational language punctuated by dramatic imagery—typifies the slam poetry style that became popular in Africa over the past decade.[1] Slam poetry's decades-long spread through southeastern Africa has fundamentally shifted the poetic landscape. Bringing locally conventional attitudes towards poetry into conversation with slam poetry styles, spoken word artists and the institutions that support them have negotiated a place for poetry performance in a contemporary urban landscape.[2] Slam poetry's emphasis on participation and populism has produced new poetic communities, centered on urban youth organizations who take advantage of the genre's openness to produce a wide range of poetry and to center themselves firmly in what they see as a globally salient, culturally valuable form. Throughout, social media aesthetics and circulations are shaping live performance venues and genres, transforming poetic form through the direct action of institutions and the indirect influence of internet sites.

As Jahan Ramazani has argued in his recent writings about poetries of place (2014, 2017), local poetry may "seem to provide a stay against the dislocative pressures and gigantic scale of globalization" ("The Local Poem in a Global Age" 671). Traveling

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[1] In this chapter, I use the term "slam poetry" to denote the styles of poetry commonly performed at competitive poetry slams. "Spoken word poetry" refers more broadly to contemporary styles of performance poetry, including (and often influenced by) but not limited to slam poetry.

[2] Ryan Milner (2016) argues that multimodal communication is one of 5 central characteristics of web-based art forms, which make use of the internet's multimodality to juxtapose the familiar and the novel.

transforms both the slam poem and the poetry it encounters: far from being a stable "global" form, open to the imposition of "local" content, it consists a set of values and attitudes which poets adapt to transform slam poetry globally.. Young poets in southern Africa have adopted and adapted the slam form in part as a bulwark against global anonymity and in part to stake a claim in its global presence, creating a globally legible, locally specific literary affiliation.

In these encounters between form and function, each element of poetic meaning-making is transformed, creating a global form recognizable in ideology if not in aesthetics or production. To illustrate the spread and influence of slam poetry in southeastern Africa, I will begin with a brief outline of slam poetry's history and its primary formal characteristics. From there, I will trace four characteristics of slam's proliferation: its joint virtual and social circulation; its rapid institutional spread; its local adaptations; and its influence on the broader cultural category of "poetry." Most practitioners and fans first encounter slam online, where it is spread through viral YouTube videos and direct links. I therefore begin with an examination of "tribute night" at Blantyre's KwaHaraba Poetry Nights, where poets read their favorite poems by other writers, demonstrating how slam's digital spread shapes the local communities that form around its performance. From there, I lay out its institutional history in the region, beginning with the Zimbabwe-based House of Hunger poetry slam. House of

Hunger's institutional spread reveals the intricate networks of international cultural

organizations that have facilitated the global diffusion of slam. However, slam's

insistence on performance gives the individual producer an unusual level of power, as

evidenced by Qabasino "Q." Malewezi's influence on Malawi's poetry scene. As I will

demonstrate, the rapid changes and generational shifts in poetry production have

engendered anxieties about the role of poetry that are tied to broader concerns about

the preservation of culture against foreign influences. Yet slam's performance aesthetics

can, in conjunction with local forms, produce new possibilities for the relationship

between performer and audience. The chapter therefore closes with a discussion of

Cape Town's Lingua Franca Spoken Word Collective to illustrate how the conjunction

of slam aesthetics, traditional forms, and multimedia performance modes can revivify

Afriphone performance standards.

HOW POETRY MEMES: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF POETIC FORM

Poetry slam competitions have spread rapidly over the past three decades, from

their 1983 starting point in Chicago's North Side and their popularization in the

Nuyorican Café in the 1990s, through cities and universities around the world.[3]

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[3] For a full history of slam's development and spread, see Susan B. A. Somers-Willet's *The Cultural Politics of Slam;* for a discussion of its relation to Blackness and identity production, see Javon Johnson's *Killing Poetry* (2017); and for a broader analysis of its formal engagemnets, see Kevin Coval's introduction to *The BreakBeat Poets* (2015).

Simultaneously a competition event and a set of stylistic and thematic norms, slam

poetry is characterized by its format: 3-minute stand-alone poems; its style:

conversational and witty; and its ethos: interactive and democratic. Because of slam's

competition format, which is judged by audience members, interactivity is key to

winning, and audience members are encouraged to call out responses if they feel

moved to do so. Poets make use of this openness to participation to engage their

audience directly, bringing them into the poem itself as co-performers in a broader

poetic community. The conversational style of most slam poems evokes the personal

relationship between audience and performer, while its emphasis on wordplay and

jokes keeps a fickle audience attentive. Finally, poems tend to be highly emotive,

relying on the inflection and bodily presence of the performer for its meaning. Such

gestures make it more immediately legible to an audience who must fathom its entire

world in just a few minutes.

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett has provided the most comprehensive and generous

overview of slam poetry's formal characteristics: it is engaging and adaptable; seeks to

convince; demands an authentic performance of the self; and is "largely dedicated to

the ideals of democracy, equality, and diversity" (2009, 19-20). Because the original

poetry slams required that poems be performed by their writer, the form offers an

opportunity for the performance of marginalized identities. That performance, in turn,

must capture its audience's attention, who are empowered to adjudicate the performance. And their adjudication speaks to the competition format's apparent populism.

Each of these characteristics have spread alongside and beyond the competition format. In particular, the sense that slam is or ought to be representative of its performers, who are asked to perform their identity directly to a semi-voyeuristic audience, has led to an emphasis on immediately legible current events and socially relevant themes. London poet Dizzee Rascal, for instance, has been praised for performing with a "UK Flavor," rather than affecting a US-American accent (Parker 2009). Similarly, in Cape Town, where English has dominated the performing arts, audience members respond vocally to "very basic" or even nonsensical Xhosa poets, because—as one poet explained—"People are happy to hear it happening," even if they don't understand it. Poets are praised or damned based on their ability to perform authenticity, to bring their own identity—or a locally legible version of it—to the performance space and to perform in a style and on topics that appear personal to them. The slam form demands local variation, its audiences looking to see the performer reflected in its content.

In the US and the UK, as Johnson and Somers-Willet have pointed out, the emphasis on "authentic" performance has manifested in poetry about identity politics

and personal suffering; in southeastern Africa, it more often takes the form of community appeals, a way of engaging an imagined community in poetry. In each place, slam poets aim to fulfill the social role they imagine poetry enacts. South African poet Siphokazi Jonas connects slam to Xhosa and Zulu praise poetry traditions, in that, "It has a very social function. It brought people together. But it was also used to critique leadership, to tell the chief, these are our grievances, and obviously to praise them and so on. […] So that for me, when I write poetry that is around rallying a community, that's the poetry that I'm drawing from." For Jonas, slam poetry presents an opportunity to build connections between poet, audience, and broader cultural landscape, a modern and largely urban response to poetic tradition. Similarly, Jules Banda, who won the University of Malawi's annual slam with a poem entitled "My Story" in 2016, told me that he writes primarily about social issues because "I believe that when I'm doing my poetry, I'm both a missionary, an activist, and also more like a brother to somebody. So I share some of the most painful experiences I've endured, just to inspire the next man."

While many agree with Banda and Jonas that slam allows a frank discussion of socially urgent and politically exigent topics pertaining to marginalized communities, each slam poem succeeds or fails based only on its ability to convince its audience. The poets' topics are therefore tempered by their audience's willingness or desire to listen.

A slam poem's themes must remain within a carefully moderated range, judged relative to its audience. At a 2016 Cape Town open mic dedicated to the Fees Must Fall protests, for instance, a white woman who had been heavily involved in the protests was heckled off the stage, her physical presence inciting a debate about race and sex in the midst of a poetry performance. In Malawi, where debates around homosexuality have been fueled by anger about international interventions, a poem arguing that homosexuality should be condemned became a popular sensation, where it would be unthinkable in most American and South African slam communities.[4]

Slam's topics reflect its community's anxieties and desires, leading many poets and scholars to claim that slam represents a populist and anticolonial form. In Kenya, critic Mwaura Samora extolled the "new poetry" as "unlike the classical poems of yesteryears promoted by former colonial powers in Africa, where conformity controlled creativity, slam promotes spoken word, a relatively new style of performance poetry that gives the artist a license for unprecedented wordplay. This is where the voices meet the verses, either to extoll virtues or to condemn vices." Slam's anxiety about and investment in authenticity, its utopian positioning within a democratic future, its

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[4] For more on the cultural reclamation of homophobia, see Crystal Biruk (2014), "'Aid for Gays': the moral and the material in 'African homophobia' in post-2009 Malawi."

implicit segregation, and its association with youth politics, all mark its engagements

with a digitally-mediated cultural shift.

In part because of its attachment to digital youth culture, slam poetry seems to

spread virally, appearing unbidden in secondary schools, urban community centers,

and arts organizations. The form's conventional identifiability, together with its

circulation through digital media, facilitate its proliferation in emerging cultural

institutions. But slam's global spread over the past decade has come attached to its

institutionalized form, and an already-institutionalized notion of what its words can

achieve: indeed, nearly everywhere slam poetry has spread, it was carried through a

single individual or institution. Moradewun Adejunmobi describes a typical instance in

Mali, where "slam poetry was formally introduced […] during the Etonnant Voyaguer

book festival" (2011, 8).[5] In Zimbabwe, slam was inaugurated by UK-educated Thomas

Brickhill's House of Hunger slam, founded in 2004 at the Book Café; in Malawi, by UK-

educated Q. Malewezi's mentorship programs beginning in 2006; and in South Africa,

where slam has a more diverse range of origins, its most prolific community began with

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[5] Many scholars highlight the formal attributes of slam as connected to more diffuse interpersonal networks, acknowledging the institutional spread of slam while focusing on its cultural implications and attachments. Often, the local rise of slam poetry appears within a broader trend in cosmopolitan media and educational standards, as in of Gray's study of cultural influence in Malawian media (2014) or Molebatsiv and d'Abdon's study of youth "floetry" in South Africa (2007). Otherwise, scholars figure slam poetry's spread through the lens of global Blackness, as in Flynn and Marrest's study of Canadian slam poetry (2008), Bronwen Low's analysis of televised slam poetry (2006) and Josephs's reading of Stacyann Chin's poetry (2009).

the spread of House of Hunger in 2008. By examining the spread of slam poetry in southeastern Africa, we see both the general patterns of the form's circulation and the specific ways a particular literary form has influenced the region's community-oriented poetry.

MOVING ONLINE AND OFF: THE DIGITAL SPREAD OF THE SLAM POEM

Even though it is primarily a performance form, slam lives and breeds online, where poets and audiences mingle across a range of platforms and where audience voices and adaptations can overtake the poet's original piece (van der Starre 2014). Most of the artists I spoke with reported that their first exposure to slam was through videos produced for and posted to YouTube, which a friend or family member shared with them. The circulation and proliferation of slam poems online inform the poetry performed on the ground, reproducing the form across an increasing range of local cultural contexts—as at the Blantyre-based KwaHaraba Open "No-Mic" Night, which I attended weekly for three months.

Every Wednesday night, a small group of poets and friends gather to share and celebrate poetry at the KwaHaraba Gallery and Café. MC and poet Yankho Seunda uses his bass voice, honed to a deep boom through his radio training, to draw the audience's attention to poetry without the benefit of a microphone—an absence he turns into a joke as he welcomes us to this "open no-mic night." The power  often goes out during the

winter droughts, and the poets and MC must shout over the hum of the venue's generator. But the audience makes up for this lack of power by recording the performances to their cell phones, marking a potential future audience—if one that is inevitably unknowable. As each poet performs, then, she addresses a global imaginary of poetry's audiences for an immediate community of fellow poets.

KwaHaraba's poetic influences showcase the digital spread of slam poetry while also suggesting that even nascent institutions like the small open mic night directly shape the local and regional spread of poetic forms. At each session, poets recited their and others' poems to other poets. When they had no new poems to perform, though, they took inspiration from their favorite poets. Often, this meant reading poems by U. S. American and U.K. poets directly from their cell phones. In Malawi, slam poems from the global North—published on YouTube and shared through direct links, Bluetooth connections, and personal hard drives—help poets orient their work to an imagined mainstream of slam, connected to its American origins. However, YouTube poetry videos influence poets only in context: a video affects no one not in contact with it or its audiences. Slam's aesthetics go viral as poets share the poems, moving the poem beyond its original context and bringing the aesthetics of the original poem into the new context.
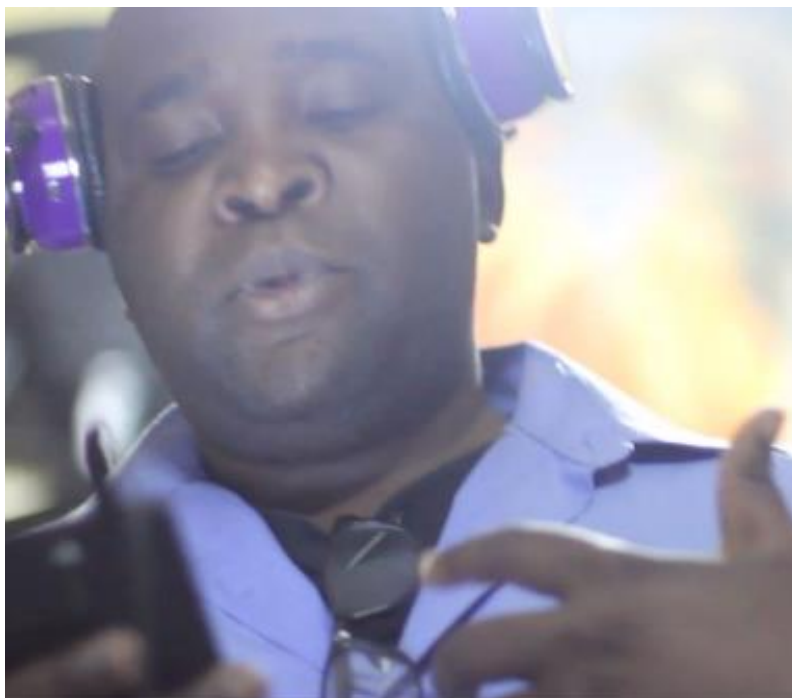
*Figure 10. Muyanga reading Jackie Hill-Perry's "Suffering Servant" from his phone at KwaHaraba Poetry Night's Appreciation Night, 21 Sept 2016*

On 21 September 2016, for instance, the theme of "Appreciation" required that all eleven poets select a favorite poem composed by someone else. Though thematically unusual, tribute nights reveal the networks of Malawian art worlds. In performing others' work during the evening, poets bring it into a new space and context and thus introduce its formal standards into that space. While many poets spoke about the difficulty of choosing a single favorite poet or poem, five of the eleven performed work by American or South African singers and slam poets, including Tupac, Cold Play, and slam poet Kurt Schoder, while only six performed poems by Malawian poets. Five of those chose poems by friends or other younger poets; only one performed a "classic" Malawian poem. Nine of the eleven artists performed poems they read from their

mobile phones. Poetry, even in performance, was mediated through mobile technology

and spread internationally. This points to an outward-looking, internationalist spirit,

eager to adopt a broad range of influences, as well as a general awareness of the

importance of the internet and of social networks to spreading poetry trends.

That night, the poet Muyanga performed a cover of American poet Jackie Hill-

Perry's "Suffering Servant," which he read from his phone (fig. 10). As Muyanga read,

his vocal rhythm evoked Hill-Perry's, drawing out the pauses between lines to teach his

audience how to respond to the poem's emotional content. The poem begins:

> Some people make me sad
> They walk past me
> With the rattle of buried bodies in their skeletons
> And I am interested in why they haven't // dropped them off yet.

In his performance, Muyanga drew out the pause between the third and fourth lines,

heightening its emotional pay-off. In doing so, he also taught his audience how to

interpret his rhythms, so that by the time he got to the third stanza, when he paused in

a similar moment, they could anticipate upcoming pay-offs. The stanza reads:

> I wish I could wake them up,
> Untuck them from the comfort of lonely,
> And remind them that some dreams do come true,
> That a heart with chameleon like pain // Won't always be that color

The pause in the first stanza had clued in the audience to his vocal rhythms, and several audience members snapped after "chameleon like pain"—before they even got to the hopeful resolution of the final clause.

Of course, there is more at play here than a single moment of interaction. Hill-Perry's rhythms evoke the heightened rhythms of slam poetry, a form that circulates widely online. Before hearing Muyanga's rendition, then, the audience may have known broadly how the rhythms matched up with specific emotional responses and primed to respond appropriately. They would have been familiar with the rhythmic signals of the genre, prepared to respond to the poem before they ever heard it. Together, the individual piece, the broader form it evokes, and the technologies on which it circulates, taught his audience how to respond to his work, and where to look for his influences. Such circulation is transforming the relationship between poet and audience in live venues like KwaHaraba as poets engage a single audience that is simultaneously local and global.

The circulation of poetry through digital spaces has reframed the poetry read at live venues, bringing outside voices and styles into local spaces and facilitating the spread of new forms. Even reading others' words, the poets performed their authentic engagement with and attachment to the text, provoking the audience's laughter and sympathy—an emotional response which affirmed broader group affinities. Typically,

the audience's responses gain momentum as the evening moves forward: early poems get very little response, the audience as cool and as nervous as the poets, but as things progress, they begin to loosen and cheer louder; the end of the event is invariably raucous, with cheers after almost every line and laughter in response to Seunda's jokes and teasing. After the performances ended, the poets spent time together outside, reviewing the week and commenting on one another's selections of poems. More than the poetry itself, the act of sharing a space and sharing attention produced a community ethos which could, in turn, produce poetic attention. The poetry that had been published and initially encountered digitally took on new life in its grounded performance, its recontextualization allowing the production of a locally specific, aesthetically attentive community attuned to global poetic trends.

HOUSE OF HUNGER POETRY SLAMS, LINDA GABRIEL, AND NETWORKED POETRY

Even as slam poetry circulates online, institutions have shaped the formal spread of slam poetry along with the slam competition. Events like KwaHaraba's "Appreciation" night render visible the digital lines of slam's circulation within live spaces of performance. They reveal the importance of social media circulations in producing slam as a global meme with local formal manifestations. Having illustrated how slam's digital circulations shape its formal spread, I turn now to evaluate the role of institutions in its spatial spread. In southeastern Africa, this story begins in 2005 at

House of Hunger, a monthly poetry slam in Harare that brought together the city's

growing poetry and performance community to shape a generation of poets through

the rhythm of the slam, before beginning a franchise that would shape slam poetry in

South Africa, as well.

The House of Hunger poetry slam, named after Dambudzo Marechera's

canonical 1978 novel, was Zimbabwe's first poetry slam. Organized by the Book Café

and funded by parent organization Pamberi Trust, House of Hunger hosted slams

regularly between 2005 and 2015, launching the careers of many of Zimbabwe's most

famous young poets, including poet/comedians Outspoken and Comrade Fatso,

international slam champion Madzitatiguru, and poet/entrepreneur Linda Gabriel. The

slams brought together up-and-coming poets with mentors who performed at the Book

Café. Winning House of Hunger's annual slams further allowed poets to travel

throughout Zimbabwe and to poetry festivals in South Africa, Swaziland, Malawi, and

Mozambique, producing a regional network of slam and performance poets shaped

through House of Hunger's communities. The venue's emergence and influence

enhanced regional networks and supported new poetic forms mediated by its

investment in specific artistic productions and communities.

Pamberi Trust is the preeminent arts organization and funder in Harare, its

primary goal to create venues for arts production and to support emerging events and

organizations. Pamberi, which means "moving forward" in Shona, was founded by liberation fighter Paul Brickhill as part of ZANU-PF's push for culturally responsible work following the second chimurenga. Today it is funded primarily through international cultural funds like Africalia (Netherlands), the Collinson Trust (UK), and the British Trust, acting as funding intermediary and arts incubator for the city. For many Zimbabwean artists, Pamberi represents a light at the end of a—sometimes very dark—tunnel: poet and singer Vera Chisvo reported she felt that, no matter what else the country went through, "As long as Pamberi's there, it will be okay." Pamberi, then, is not simply a funding, organizing, or production company: it is a symbol of the country's cultural heritage and future.

One of Pamberi's first ventures was the highly influential Book Café. Founded in 1993, the Book Café was unique—and ultimately unsustainable—because, along with poetry, it offered below-cost meals for attendees. In a country that had faced a severe cash shortage, repeated famines, and political violence for the past two decades, Book Café offered a gathering place which allowed a degree of political discussion otherwise impossible in public. Poets and musicians as diverse and established as Chirikure Chirikure, Madzitatiguru, and Philani A. Nyoni came together at the Book Café, collaborating with South African poets like Bheki Khoza and Malawian writers including Stanley Kenani and Shadreck Chikoti. The Book Café's regular open mics, its

renowned featured poets, its meal services, and its consistent location made it an

important gathering point for Harare's cultural producers. Its 2005 launch of the House

of Hunger poetry slams opened a space specifically for young performance-oriented

poets influenced by the spreading form.

Between 2005 and 2015, the House of Hunger Poetry Slam was an annual event,

beginning with a series of monthly mini-slams to whittle the contenders down to a

small set of finalists prior to the major competition each May.[6] The recurring monthly

slams did not lock poets out, though: instead, they provided writers an opportunity to

hone their writing and performance skills, to learn from one another, and to meet fellow

poets. At the height of House of Hunger's popularity, in 2012-13, each poet would come

prepared with three entirely new poems each month, one for each round of the slam.

Despite the slam's popularity, the poetry community remained relatively small: most of

the monthly slam events had attendance of fewer than 50 people, allowing a close-knit

community to develop around the poetry produced there. According to Linda Gabriel,

who won the slam several times and ran it several more, the insularity of the poetry

community had at least one positive effect: because they were performing for the same

audience over and over, poets had to bring in new work each month or risk

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[6] The slams faded after Paul Brickhill's death in 2014 but were restarted by Morset Billie as monthly events beginning in 2017.

disqualification. The slams took on a workshop-like quality, helping amateurs improve as they quickly produced highly topical poems regularly.

For a poetry slam to work, the audience must know its language, its terms of engagement, and its expectations. Their attention is the currency of the evening, determining each poet's success or failure. Even though the audience was small and regular, and likely knew the routine, the MC opened each slam by calling everyone to attention to refamiliarize them with the expectations of the slam. The speech was so regular and so ritualized that it gained the qualities of a chant, a rhythmic encounter drawing audience and organizer together. These call-and-response traditions symbolize the slam's political orientations: audience-driven and adjudicated, the slam is imagined as a utopian, democratic format, where poets are free to present their personal experiences and be judged purely on their merit. As soon as the MC took the stage, usually about 20 minutes after the official start time, the audience knew what to expect, and behaved accordingly. The MC begins, "Ladies and gentlemen, ple*ee*ase," his voice dipping for emphasis as he draws out the word, "Show some respect." He explains, "We're here for the poetry slam," before going on to describe the event in its own terms. The audience cheers at prescribed moments, as their attention is called into question: "Can you all hear me?" "Are you excited?" If they respond mildly, the ritual repeats, an emotional warm-up to the main event. The MC thus creates the conditions in which a

slam poem can appropriately succeed or fail, offering normative aesthetic judgements against which audience and poet negotiate what constitutes a successful performance.

As each poet takes the stage, the audience starts off silent, waiting for her to earn their attention and their regard. Often, she will launch directly into the poem, relying on the energy and intensity of those first few lines to bring her audience along with her into the world she describes. Occasionally, she will explain her poem—especially if it is not in English, or if the performance will be slow-paced—in order to prime her audience, ensuring that she gets the right kind of attention. Poets who are known quantities will have an easier time getting their audience's attention than new poets, who must prove themselves, and poems that audiences know well enough to speak along with are more popular still. In each case, the success or failure of an individual performance will rely on the poet's ability to engage her audience emotionally.

*The Slam Poet and Her Audience*



Figure 11. Linda Gabriel performing "Sins of Our Mothers" in Durban at Poetry Africa 2013.

Gabriel's poem "Sins of Our Mothers," which combines storytelling techniques with emotional poetic refrains, won her the 2010 House of Hunger slam championship. The poem has since been featured on Pan-African poetry podcast *Badilisha Poetry X-Change*, on the internationalist website *ZimArtists*, and in Gabriel's interactive one-woman play about sex work. It lasts three minutes, the length of a typical slam poem, and in everything—from its humanization of a taboo subject, to the complicated relationship it produces between poet and audience, to its speechified rhythm and surprise wordplay—it calls attention to its relationship to the slam form. Unlike most slam poems, which are planned to fit the competition's time constraints, "Sins of Our

Mothers" brings audience quirks and behaviors—such as a cough or a ringing phone—

into the performance. Each time Gabriel performs the poem, her audience is aware of

the generic relationships she evokes and responds accordingly: they come to her

performances prepared to become part of the act, to be made into poetic collaborators.

As the piece opens, Gabriel stares down her audience and considers:

> Sins of our mothers
> That are never told to us
> That are written in silence, on their hearts
> Printed on their palms and repeated in their footsteps
> That stretches from As to Zs of life[7]

The opening metaphor of writing carries us into the poem to evoke the problem of

poetry, the difficulty of telling and writing the invisible "As to Zs of life." From there,

the poem runs through a series of anecdotes, each one relying on wordplay for its

impact. Puns encourage the audience to actively participate in the construction of the

poem's meaning. The ambiguous plurality of "us" and "our" anonymizes the poem's

speaker to tell a story of cultural trends rather than of individual pain and suffering.

The poem's story, told en masse, with details too numerous and contradictory to be any

one person's story, becomes a story of collectivity. It gains momentum beyond its

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[7] Unless otherwise noted, all transcriptions are my own.

immediate performance, drawing the audience into the accusatory gaze of gender-

based exploitation and suffering.

"Sins of Our Mothers" is a narrative poem: it claims attention through the stories

it tells rather than through nuanced images or exciting rhythms. Gabriel told me that

her aim with the poem is to humanize sex work, to remind her audience that

transactional sex is a part of everyday human suffering, one which should be

confronted rather than hidden away. The poem's audience is, in each of the three

performances I have observed, nearly silent except in moments when her gestures call

for their responses—and at moments when they recognize personal experiences in the

poem's story. Gabriel has performed the poem in South Africa, Germany, Swaziland,

and the US, arguing that its themes—of sacrifice, of taboo and the unspoken, of family

life and generational divides—are timeless and universal.

As a poem, "Sins of Our Mothers" relies on its performance, on Gabriel's

embodiment of its message, for its effect. Unlike in a silent reading or a secondary

interpretation, she explains, "When I'm there on stage, my emotion, my voice, my body,

everything is to do with the poem." Online and in recording, the poem sacrifices

interactivity for immediacy, producing a totalizing narrative of women's experiences.

Circulated in many iterations on YouTube, "Sins of Our Mothers" moves across media

and cultural contexts, changing its meaning in its movement yet appealing to global

understandings of slam poetry throughout. Online and in recording, the poem sacrifices

interactivity for immediacy, producing a totalizing narrative of women's experiences.

For Gabriel, as for novelist Virginia Phiri whose *Highway Queen* has seen similar

responses and for journalists advocating for gender equality in Zimbabwe, literature's

role is to highlight these injustices, to bring an audience together around their shared

outrage, and to verbalize and make real the silenced and ignored.

*Linda Gabriel and the Regional Slam*

For Gabriel, poetry is not simply a profession but a social calling, one which

requires she move between communities, building her community while honoring

social norms and orders. Gabriel has worked across the region since 2008, setting up

poetry slams and communities in Johannesburg and Lilongwe and connecting poets

across the continent. In 2015, she organized the Spoken Word Project, a digitally-

facilitated slam competition and poetic collaboration meant to render visible the

networks of spoken word artists spanning the continent. A series of competitions in

South Africa, Madagascar, Angola, Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, and

Germany brought together each country's top poets. In each place, poets were required

to integrate elements from the previous country's winning selections, dramatizing the

networks of poetic influence in Africa. At its completion, the Spoken Word Project

brought all 24 winning poets together to perform in Germany, where the memorial

website was launched with a web gallery of films of the winning performances and

interviews with the poets.
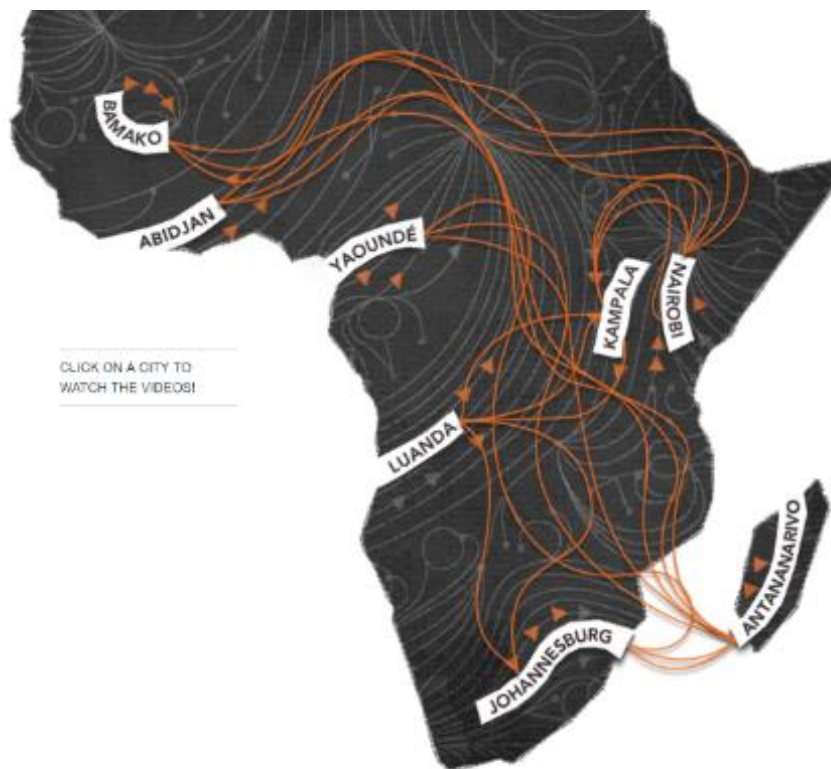


*Figure 12. Front image from "The Spoken Word Project" website, with poets' biographies and performances linked to the cities in which they competed.*

Gabriel intended the site to become a central organizing space for poets and

networkers to announce events and festivals, collaborate on ideas, and share

inspiration. Because of shifts in funding structures halfway through the competition

sequence, though, the site remains primarily a memorial to the event, with no updates

and no way of engaging the poetry directly. The site presents the project—and slam

poetry more generally—as a spatial form, with poets' biographies and videos linked to

the city in which they performed, while swirling orange lines and arrows indicate lines

of influence and engagement *(fig. 12)*. Pale grey lines imply a universe of interactions

and influences beyond those mapped and created by the project. The image testifies to

the expanse and limitations of slam poetry on the continent. The seventy-four winners

and runners-up dress in suits, t-shirts, and colorful dresses. They are all young, between

18 and 25, and live in cities. They all perform in Europhone languages, and their poems

replicate the rhythms of slam poetry. Their topics include colonial traumas,

contemporary inequalities, love and childhood, God and family. Their work thus

typifies the global state of spoken word poetry, a memeplex which has launched an

international project.

Even with its somewhat disappointing end, the Spoken Word Project's intense

networking and hybrid online/offline realization manifest Gabriel's goals: to heighten

awareness of Africa's place in global literary productions, to connect poets and

performers across the continent, and to use the best of today's poetry to encourage

future artists. In doing so, the Spoken Word Project made use of the rapidly growing

importance of internet and mobile technologies to spread a very specific, pre-judged

poetry form, further encouraging the development of a networked poetics of

performance.

Gabriel's experience with this kind of organizing emerged from her work with

House of Hunger. She began working in South Africa as a delegate for Book Café in

2008. Her goal was to found a satellite branch of House of Hunger in Johannesburg.

While there, Gabriel worked with the Goethe Institute, who would fund the branch, and

the Alliance Française, who would host it. The resulting venue remained a popular

success for nearly six years as it continued to host regular local slams, workshops, and

national slams. Early on, Gabriel was the event's only MC, and her voice played a

strong role in shaping its attitudes. Many of the winners have been women,

encouraging unusually high participation by women in the city and across the country.

Yet even though the form is global, and the venues regional, most communities are

highly local, often city- or even neighborhood-bound depending on the availability of

transit and the wealth of the surrounding community. Johannesburg is the fourth

largest city in Africa by population; its metro area covers over 600 square miles. No

point in the city is geographically central. In founding House of Hunger at a l'Alliance

Fraçaise, a preexisting cultural center, Gabriel took advantage of a common gathering

place for artists and cultural producers, one which had the funds to support the event

indefinitely.

A German and a French cultural institution, funding a Zimbabwean poetry

foundation to start a performance night in South Africa, reshaped Johannesburg's

poetry communities, whose poets now "slam too much," according to their

counterparts in Cape Town and Durban. House of Hunger's success inspired the launch

of themed annual slams including Word N Sound, which features musical- and rap-inflected poetry, the business- and network-focused Poetry dot Slam, and the team-based Open Slam. While the franchise could not work everywhere, and Gabriel's efforts to start a parallel franchise in Lilongwe, Malawi in 2011 failed, the Johannesburg House of Hunger and the Spoken Word Project both point to slam's fungibility, its international appeal, and the importance of a few figures in making poetry happen internationally.

CREATING A PERSONAL POETICS: Q. MALEWEZI AND THE MALAWIAN SLAM SCENE

Gabriel's story is one of institutional influence carried out by an individual: her ties to House of Hunger, in conjunction with her personal determination, allowed her to develop a series of de-personalized projects, venues, and performances. Where Gabriel did not start a slam franchise in Lilongwe, though, poet and rapper Q. Malewezi had already done so. Between 2008 and 2017, Malewezi established a series of small institutions, educational programs, and major performances, harnessing his connections to Malawi's cultural infrastructures to produce a slam-oriented poetry community and audience. Through workshops, performance venues, and mentorship programs around poetry performance, Malewezi has developed programming peripheral to the influence

of the sort of cultural IGOs House of Hunger courts. In doing so, he has created a new set of poetic networks tied to Malawi's poetic history and to his own poetic style.

In June 2015, Malewezi began performing a new poem, "People," and released it as a single to be played on radio shows. Soon, poems echoing the themes and style of "People" proliferated. The poem's structure is simple and easily replicated, linking together "people" as subject and "people" as object to plea for empathy and tolerance. The poem begins, "People—like people. / People—know people. / People—trust people. / People—make—people—happy." From this pleasantly saccharine opening, it develops into a hurried, restless, redoubling refrain by complicating the premise: "People like people people like / People want people people have," before turning violent, reminding us that, "People burn people / People bomb people," and finally concludes with the enjoinder, "We are more than just people. / We / Are a just people."

The simplicity of "People" makes it easy even for non-fluent English speakers to follow, and its structure invited substantial adaptations. Poet and singer Lily Banda[8] contextualized its address in her take on the poem, which she performed at the launch of Malewezi's album, rewriting it as "Fire People" in reference to Malawi's name, which means "land of fire." Her poem begins by evoking Malewezi's, repeating not "people"

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[8] Banda is the most common surname in Malawi, and most people named Banda are unrelated. Because I discuss several poets who share the last name in this chapter, I refer throughout to each of them by both first and last name.

but "we the people," before culminating in the reminder that "Yes, even though it was a time before our bones were even formed, / We remember aMalawi means / The fire people." Like Malewezi, Lily Banda writes in English, but unlike him, she addresses a specifically Malawian audience, assuming their connection to her rather than encouraging them to make the connection themselves.

Lily Banda is not alone in her adoption of Malewezi's form: Yankho Seunda's only Chichewa poem, "Mwabwerako" ("You have returned here") uses the fluctuating refrain, "Mwabwera liti kuno mudzi Mwaira? Kuno kali magetsi." ("Why have you returned to Mwaira village? There is electricity here."), to frame a narrative comparing the migrant speaker to a forgetful outsider or animal. And Robert Chiwamba's popular poem "Flames Sidzamva" ("Flames Won't Learn," a reference to Malawi's failing national football team), repeats, "Flames sidzamva, Flames sidzamva, Flames sidzamva" to frame the team's most embarrassing failures. These poems use repetition and a single word's many valences to carry their message—moves that were typical of Malewezi's "People" and that have become increasingly popular in its wake.

Such poems spread through live performances, through WhatsApp groups, and through publication on YouTube and on the Malawian poetry site SapitwaPoetry.com.[9]

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[9] SapitwaPoetry.com was founded by Robert Chiwamba in late 2015. Modeled on the highly successful MalawiMusic.com, Sapitwa Poetry allows poets to directly upload recordings of their work to the site, where fans can then listen to and download the work. Though currently free (July 2018), Chiwamba has

While these platforms open up apparently global—or at least broadly regional—

audiences and acclaim, that comes only after poets gain recognition among highly local

communities. Malewezi's poetic form and style has penetrated youth poetry scenes

across regional and linguistic divides, thanks in large part to his prolific event

organizing and program management. Only with local support can poets' work gain

traction in the transnational spaces of YouTube and Facebook. To understand how

Malewezi has influenced the Malawian poetry scene, we must first examine the

boundaries under which Malawian spoken word artists operate. From there, we can see

how Malewezi's style has shaped his peers' and mentees' writing, and how the

emergence of slam poetry has reconfigured the Malawian poetry scene. Together,

Malewezi's story—personal, institutional, and formal—is the story of Malawian spoken

word, demonstrating the importance of the individual poet to a national poetry

community.

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plans to monetize the site by requiring users to pay a nominal fee (approximately $1) to download a poem. This would address the problem of monetization which plagues poets who publish digitally.

*Towards a Malawian Slam Aesthetic*



*Figure 13. Poets praising Pres. Hastings Banda. Courtesy of Department of Information, Malawi.*

In Malawi, poetry is so embedded in the national culture that histories often depict the country as a land of poets and singers, defining communities by cultural memories preserved in song and by discourses perpetuated in song composition and dissemination. As discussed in the first chapter, liberation leader turned authoritarian president Hastings Kamuzu Banda used poetry and dance to evoke and eventually produce a national community centered on his leadership (cf. Lwanda 2004). The poet, in this context, keeps and creates collective memory, granting him the ability to authorize or condemn political activity and cultural claims. Slam poetry—as a form largely committed to urgent sociopolitical concerns—emerges in Malawi as an urban and youth-based answer to poetic tradition, and as one of the few spaces where political

critique is possible. Nonetheless, it has faced an uphill battle for general appreciation: at

the 2013 Lake of Stars festival, Malawi's largest arts event, Malawezi made his exit by

declaring, "Finally, poetry is on the main stage—poetry wins!" Sponsored by Scottish

and Malawian NGOs as well as several major international companies, the festival

offers artists exposure to a larger audience than they could have drawn on their own,

granting those genres and media it acknowledges privileged status.

Malewezi's performances of slam-style poetry bring his rap background into a

poetry form addressing Malawian themes. Rather than adapt the style of slam, his

primary shift is in interactivity, directly addressing his audience as co-producers of his

poetry. Their engagement in his performance implicate them in its political stakes: as

Luphenga Mphande argues, "orality provides a forum for participation in the political

discourse by ordinary members of the community" (22). Far from the depersonalized,

formal appeals to oral tradition of earlier Malawian poetry, described by Mphande

(1996) and Rueben Chirambo (2010) in their analyses of Malawi Writers' Group poets,

Malawezi's performances integrate audience in their unfolding, requiring the

understanding of cultural adepts. Although he uses symbols common in Malawian

writing and performance, he deliberately breaks away from traditional performances.

His rhythm, intonation and pauses are instead reminiscent of poetry slams, positioning

the poem simultaneously in the tradition of political Anglophone poetry in Malawi and in the similarly—if often more explicitly—politically active tradition of slam poetry.

For instance, in his performances of "Wikipedia," his best-known and most-requested poem, Malawezi calls forth audience responses. His audience speaks along with or calls back to him, intimately familiar with his twists and turns. Their engagement both strengthens the poem's message and implicates them in the creation of that message. "Wikipedia," like its namesake website, is a poem of rhetorical links and logical leaps, using words and phrases to connect disparate themes: "revolution," for instance, brings together rebellion and solar cycles, and "people" joins nationalism with inequality. In his performance, Malewezi enacts this jerky logical train with a series of rhythmic pauses and sonic disconnects as he moves rapidly between hard, closed consonants and repetitive, elongated syllables.

After three minutes of fast-paced commentary touching on nearly every aspect of Malawian politics, Malewezi concludes by slowing down, allowing a lulling repetition to enter the poem:

| QM: | Audience: |
|---|---|
| The sun is also the central symbol of the Malawi flag | |
| That has been changed from | |
| The rising sun | |
| To the risen sun | to the risen sun |
| And then back to the rising sun | rising sun |
| And they say this was done | |
| To show where we have moved to as a people | |

> Our sun has risen,
> Malawi's sun has risen
> Yet its sons and daughters remain in a deep sleep,          *sleeeeeep*
>                    *sleeeeep, sleeeeep, sleep*
> Sleep is what we do when hunger, greed,
> Poverty, sin and fear blind our eyes
> From seeing our real risen sun

Malewezi uses his body language, shifts in intonation, and even hand gestures like a hypnotist or an orchestral conductor, to elicit emotional responses from his audiences that are perfectly coordinated with his own vocal and bodily rhythms. Moving between the rising and the risen suns, Malewezi gradually raises and lowers each hand, so that when he asks, "Where we have moved to as a people," the sudden upswing and increasingly chaotic hand gestures—mirroring and yet mocking the smooth rising and falling of the sun—reinforce the relationship between poet, audience, and nation his words have created.

The agentless changing of the Malawian flag, the nameless political "they," even the disembodied, free-floating evils of modern life, insinuate an intimacy between performer and audience—one acted out when, as he speaks the words, "its sons and daughters remain in a deep sleep," Malewezi raises his hands to shoulder level and moves them in small, rhythmic circles, eliciting the proper response from his audience: a rhythmically ululating, "slee-ee-eep." Malawezi creates his poem—and his indictment of Malawian governance—through the audience's cooperation, making them complicit

in the poem and its message.  The audience is then empowered to perform their own commentary on Malewezi's poem, taking up his message, and his poem's form, to produce variations on the theme, transforming the poetic form into a viral meme as they did with "People."

*The Institutionalization of Poetic Form in Malawi*

Malewezi's influence began in Lilongwe, where he has run poetry workshops, performance venues, and slam competitions since 2008. In 2012, he founded Project Project, which aimed to encourage poetic expression among youth in Malawi. Project Project transformed Malewezi's informal mentoring efforts—which had gone on through his recording studio, a series of open mic nights, and individual relationships—into a professionalizing endeavor that would help talented young poets. It was a multigenerational mentorship, allowing Lily Banda, one of his most established collaborators, to take the stage with him. Some of his younger mentees have in turn founded their own poetry programs. Jules Banda, for instance, has launched a poetry mentorship and education initiative for secondary school students which helps provide school fees and tutoring. Phindu Banda has set up a poetry festival at Dzeleka Refugee Camp to encourage refugees to deal with their experiences through poetry. And Robert Chiwamba has worked with UNESCO to bring poetry programs into schools and community centers within the organization's broader literacy work. Together, through

a series of small organizations, Malewezi and his collaborators are building a youth-

oriented poetry infrastructure in Malawi.

For each of these program organizers, poetry is a public and communal good:

each season of Chiwamba's program culminates in a series of performance

competitions, and Phindu Banda's work at Dzeleka Refugee Camp concluded with a

festival performance.[10] Many of these performances are commissioned for international

agencies like UNESCO and the WHO, which sponsor annual poetry competitions. As in

Zimbabwe, the primary funders of poetry in Malawi are foreign NGOs and IGOs with

their own particular cultural and economic goals. Many poets rely on commissions

from NGOs and commercial organizations for their income, performing jingle-like

poems in support of the group's message or programming—even as they wish for the

freedom to critique them.

These institutions gate what poetry is heard and promoted. While the apparently

global—or broadly regional—audiences opened up by television shows, YouTube

channels, and international festivals remain a goal for many poets, emerging poets rely

on success at local poetry readings and slams, and recognition by local communities,

before their work can gain traction in the transglobal spaces of YouTube and Facebook.

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[10] Maureen Perry (2011), Mia Fiore (2013), and Valerie Chepp (2016) have identified similar pedagogical uses of slam poetry in the US, suggesting that the form's open-endedness make it particularly suited for eliciting and supporting youth voices and movements.

In communities like the KwaHaraba Open No-Mic Nights, local affiliations and digital conversations combine to produce novel opportunities for emerging poets. The local success of young poets is thus predicated as much on infrastructural support and artistic networks as it is on the actual poetry produced. Individual success relies on the common and immediate familiarity of the audience with the cultural product itself. As Ryan Milner has argued of internet forms more generally, success requires "balancing a fixed premise with novel expression. […] In their common characteristics, mutual awareness, and transformative circulation, memes are at once universal and particular, familiar and foreign" (14). The spoken word meme requires cultural legibility to fully take hold—a specificity which may translate more readily across national spaces than within them. To achieve recognition on a global platform like YouTube, for instance, poets may have to perform in English, or perform a version of their experiences that are more legible to regional audiences than they are to local ones.

THE TROUBLE WITH SLAM: DEBATES ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE SLAM POEM

As its affiliations with digital spread and Europhone expression suggest, slam poetry is a cosmopolitan form, one which travels readily between urban spaces but only diffuses into the broader national context with proper translation. Regionally, slam poetry and its performance venues have become rhetorical and social spaces where

urban youth can gather to produce community and have their voices heard. The rise of

slam poetry as a youth-facilitated cosmopolitan aesthetic form has engendered new

anxieties about the relationship between the poet, her audience, and their broader social

setting. Stanley Kenani, one of Malawi's foremost living writers, wrote in an interview

with *The Nation* that young Malawian poets are "jokers: writers who write jokes and try

to pass them out as poetry. They show no interest to learn more about the art and are

more interested in quick fame" (22 July 2016). Poetry's form and function have

themselves become a source of debate, most often worked out through the circulating

talk of social media networks, drawing together poets, critics, and fans in online

forums.

The self-publishing impulses of social media have seen an increasing number of

poets and commentators describing, filming, and photographing their experiences,

producing narratives of what poetry is, or might be, and the excess or lack that they

encounter in it. On 27 October 2016, for instance, Malawian poet and critic Mankhokwe

Namusanya posted in disappointment on his Facebook page:

> Yesterday, I was on a poetry trail. I decided to leave the association of armchair
> critics […] I went out, to get what is on the ground. I started with Kwa Haraba.
> The Place where 'young ones' are meeting every Wednesday to perform poetry
> or spoken word (however you would want to call it). I stayed there briefly. In
> that brief moment, I experienced both poetry and nonsense. Both paraded as
> poetry or spoken word. [...] Somehow, you could understand the laptop and
> smartphone critics for saying poetry is dead. It's as if they have a valid point. But

also, being on the ground presents a different picture. There is some talent to be nurtured.

Namusanya's post crystallized debates that had been on the rise in Malawi since 2014: what counts as poetry, and whether the young writers deserve the title. It was quickly copied and sent out through the "young ones's" social networks, derided at open mic nights, discussed in workshops, and debated on WhatsApp, where I first saw it.

Despite Namusanya's willingness to do away with definitional distinctions, "however you want to call it," at the heart of these debates is a contestation over the prestige that comes with the word "poetry." The term carries with it a clear cultural currency, associated with the height of intellectual experimentation in some circles and of social intervention in others. The term "poetry" has deep political stakes, tied in the sixteenth century to the development of a literate classes; in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries to the development of national identities; in colonial practices to the division of civilized and savage peoples; and to the fetishization of folk practices and political investments in the avant-garde. In Malawi, H. K. Banda founded and commissioned the Chichewa department at the University of Malawi to begin writing poetry in Chichewa as a way, first, to demonstrate the language's ability to carry culture and, second, to promote it as a national language (Malunga). "Poetry,." and its Chichewa near-synonym *ndakatulo,* remains a culturally potent term, one which carries this entire

history with it—a history which makes the stakes of the current artistic debate

remarkably high.

Responding directly to these debates, Chiwamba contends that the term

"poetry," and its attendant anxieties, are essentially colonial holdovers. For Chiwamba,

"poetry" as an elevated verbal form with specific aesthetic standards refers to

"traditional English poetry," which has no place in a decolonized Malawi. Chiwamba

told me that traditional poetry must engage deeply with idioms and proverbs—"things

no one understands anymore." For Chiwamba, the job of the contemporary Malawian

poet is to make poetry relevant to current issues, moving it away from its roots in

obfuscation and metaphoricity and towards the engaging rhythms and wordplay

typical of slam poetry. He said:

> The current generation hardly speaks proverbs, hardly speaks idioms, hardly
> speaks any language. They just speak plain language, and it is an instant in
> society where they don't have to go to a poem and start getting the proverbs to
> start understanding. They just want something that is plain, something they can
> understand. And the poets have responded to that and shifted from the
> traditional poetry to other one.

For Chiwamba, the future of poetry in Malawi lies in rejecting "poetry" altogether:

"What the current crop of poets is doing is vernacular spoken word, whilst what the

older group of poets is doing is traditional English poetry [in Chichewa]." Many

Anglophone poets, as Chiwamba and Namusanya note, have responded by calling

themselves "spoken word artists," abandoning the term "poet" altogether and carving out an alternative niche for themselves in the process.

Chichewa, though, has only one categorical word for spoken verbal art, *ndakatulo*, and it carries a strong attachment to the form's idealization as a carrier of culture, its historical political uses, and its current position as an inherited form. Chiwamba, who writes only in Chichewa, holds onto the position of *alakatuli* (poet) because "Poetry can have a huge impact on Malawi, because I am saying many people are now following poetry, and the poetry artists that are well known are very few in this country. So whenever they hear that someone is releasing something, they are always anticipating what it would be." Poetry as a generic category determines access to many of the cultural institutions which drive popular attention and fandoms. To gain attention as a spoken word artist, one must feature at open mics, at festivals, and on poetry radio shows; to be recognized on those platforms, one must be unambiguously identifiable as a poet. Poetry's cultural prestige constrains the forms of literary production which make claims to its label, and the debates that rage over its future will further shape the poetry that emerges.

*Finding a Middle Ground: Debates Within the South African Slam Community*

The shift to a more conversational, slam-influenced, everyday poetics is part of a broader shift towards everyday literacies and away from the heightened aesthetics of

traditional verse forms. To no small degree, this is a generational debate, as the digital circulation of slam's form and its insistence on competition produces an eternally young set of practitioners. Several of the poets I spoke to—both current and retired slam poets—have suggested that poetry competitions are for young poets, and that mature poets will inevitably turn to longer-form and more meditative performance forms. Linda Gabriel, for instance, told me that at 31, she no longer slams because "slam is more like a spring board. […] Slam for me is about energy, because I only have three minutes and have to give it my all. So that energy is different than when I'm storytelling," as she does in her current long form performance pieces. Similarly, Malewezi, who defined Malawi's slam scene for a decade, stopped slamming and turned to focus on CD production at 33. South African Siphokazi Jonas, who at 26 would fit readily into a slam community, told me that she felt slam poetry, though useful for presenting urgent issues, moved too quickly for thoughtful reflection, which had become more important to her as she grew older.

In South Africa, the poets I interviewed were split neatly along generational lines, with poets over the age of 50—those born well before the end of apartheid— largely marveling at, disparaging of, or bemused by the spoken word performance productions which were mainstream for most of those under 30, the "Born Free" generation. While a few older poets do take part in the slam poetics of the younger

generation, younger poets are acutely aware of the insecurity of their position.

Mbongeni Nomkonwana, co-founder with Lwanda Sindaphi of Lingua Franca Spoken

Word Movement, disclaimed the poetics of his own work before performing at a book

launch in May 2016. The launch featured two poets, both of whom came from a slam

background: Nomkonwana, who performs in English and isiXhosa, and Blaq Perl, an

Afrikaaps and English poet from the Cape Flats.[11] Together, their performances

showcased the range of poetic languages and performance styles currently popular in

the city. Before beginning, though, Nomkonwana told the audience, "I am a spoken

word artist. Notice I don't use the word poet, because that word carries all sort of

problems."

In an interview later, Nomkonwana clarified that, for him, the primary

"problems" of the word "poet" were the formal expectations it carried. Abandoning the

"lyric, haiku, blank verse," forms which he felt failed to reflect "the state of our

country," "we write mostly about what happens in our daily lives, so most of the time,

you don't think form, you think, I want to say something," and to do that, the simplest

and most direct way is often best. Moreover, those imported forms will often fail in

local languages: as he points out, "in isiXhosa [as in most Bantu languages] one word

can have seventeen syllables." Instead, the key is to write a poetry of life, one which

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[11] Afrikaaps refers to the style of Afrikaans spoken in the Cape Flats, a predominantly mixed-race region.

evokes feeling rather than explaining it, producing a sympathy and a shared experience between performer and audience. The empathic experience of the spoken word poem allows highly local experiences to travel broadly through a recognized format, crossing media in order to cross cultural experiences while retaining its form.

While the simpler aesthetic and more performative focus that Nomkonwana brings to his poetry was met with skepticism by some of the city's more established poets, many more have responded with enthusiasm: Antjie Krog, one of the country's most established Afrikaans poets, has collaborated with slam champion and InZync-organizer Pieter Odendaal on multiple occasions and with Nomkonwana on translation; similarly, Malika Ndlovu, a prominent poet and founder of *Badilisha Poetry X-Change*, works with many of young poets in workshops and makes a point to invite them to any festivals and events she organizes. Even as he rejects the term "poetry," Nomkonwana embraces the cultural influence it carries. Despite an overriding sense in Cape Town that a performance must be in English to be marketable, he writes primarily in isiXhosa to encourage literary and deep expression in his home language. When we first met, the Fees Must Fall protests were at their height and student protestors had been tear gassed the day before. Considering the political and historical circumstances in which he found himself, Nomkonwana told me:

> Amidst all this fighting, there's one thing that we might lose and forget, it is our tongues, it is our culture, it is where we come from. If you look at it, we fight in

English, we have to speak in English every day, we are fighting a system that is mostly colonial so you have to keep the culture, so that by the time that's done, you still have a home to come back to.

For Nomkonwana, as for many younger spoken word artists, poetry tells the story of everyday struggles and triumph, and it does so through "minimum words" and the immediate emotionality of images.

In September 2014, Lingua Franca was asked to organize the "Poetica" portion of the Open Book Festival, Cape Town's largest annual literary festival. Under Lingua Franca's guidance, the festival brought together young poets from across South Africa, culminating in a debate about whether the current, slam-centric state of performance poetry in the country was sustainable. The debate focused on what it would mean—politically and aesthetically—to make slam poetry indigenous. Lingua Franca brought their concerns to the attention of poets based in Johannesburg, where the country's slam scene is largest and most cohesive. The goal, according to Nomkonwana, was to open a conversation about the cultural politics of slam poetry, broadening its generic forms to include a more diverse array of aesthetics. While slam's sound has travelled with the format, bringing the recognition that comes with competition to a younger and wider array of poets, the contentiousness of this debate—with many poets feeling attacked or silenced—suggests that the form carries a political and cultural cost which has yet to be fully confronted. Lingua Franca recognized that poetry spreads as a cohesive cultural

unit which transforms as it spreads while maintaining its essential form and ethos. Framing the debate in terms of indigeneity, they challenged the poetic community to transform the spoken word form, to make it meaningful to local audiences.

LOCALIZING THE SPOKEN WORD: LINGUA FRANCA'S INDIGENIZATION OF SLAM POETRY

Under Nomkonwana's and Sindaphi's guidance, Lingua Franca have aimed, since 2014, to mobilize the popular formulas of the slam to produce an alternative, globally-aware, local poetic genre, one which reflects Cape Town's complicated cultural history and "multicentric" heritages. Their work thus embraces a hybrid aesthetics—an attitude which reflects, in Jahan Ramazani's words, "the aesthetic complexity of literary texts […and] invites the exegete to attend to the intercultural tensions and fusions at the level of language, style, concept, or genre" (2001, 36). By thematizing heritage in a slam-inflected performance, Lingua Franca builds on the goals of slam poetry but uses Xhosa instruments, a wide range of genres and languages, and collective poetics to produce a multicentric, hybrid poetry that addresses the city's past and its people's history.

Their most popular and best received performance, *Umzila ka Moya* ("Spirit's Path") uses participatory poetics to confront the legacies of colonialism and urbanization. The piece features a series of individual poets performing poetry about their heritage and their home lives in their home languages, with music and dance incorporated into the performance to bring the poems together, creating sonic

continuities that mark a continuity across the poets' experiences. *Umzila ka Moya* invites

both performers and audiences to announce their heritage, their home and tribe—or

else to confront the absence of a past, the violent deracination and displacement that is

the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. During the performance, each speaker moves

fluidly between center and periphery, as easily claiming as yielding the speaking stage

through a carefully choreographed event that mirrors the structure of an open mic but

abandons its atomizing effects to present a single, cohesive whole.

One such poem performed in *Umzila ka Moya* was Nomkonwa's "Dying

Tongues." The piece begins as he jumps between isiXhosa, siPedi, and seTswana, before

spitting out:

> We now write in English, we speak in English, we dream in English
> I think my spoken word sounds better in English.
> Even computers don't recognize our tongues:
> They underline every word red as if we degrade our language
> I am sick up to the neck with spelling check
>
> I do not loathe the English language
> I am suffocating from the stench it has left on my people's brains because
> It has rotted underneath our languages, forgotten
> And our government is slumbering while indigenous languages are dying
>
> Maybe with this poem I am just a little boy calling to his father's family because
> they forgot about him
> Maybe with this poem I am just a little boy calling to his mother's family because
> they are starting to forget about me
> I hear them speak of home
> Maybe that's where our answers lie
> And maybe

I want to go home

Audiences laugh along with Nomkonwana's criticism of Microsoft Word, but are stopped short by his anger at lacking his father's tongue and at having to abandon his mother's tongue for the sake of an international audience. His performance enacts the problem of figuring poetry as a universal language: because it is a form of language, it is inevitably caught up in its aesthetic histories. Yet by embracing that problem as both starting and ending point of the piece, Nomkonwana dramatizes the impossibility of finding roots in a neocolonial state.

In addition to presenting their own histories, the performers of *Umzila ka Moya* ask the audience to question their own experiences and heritage, bringing their stories on stage with the poets. As the audience enters the venue, they join the performance space itself, coming onto the stage with the poets to directly engage with their voices. And the performance itself takes over the space of the audience: one poem, which speaks of funerals and homesickness, and the eternal feeling of rootlessness, begins in silence as the performer, Katleho Kano Shoro, kneels on the ground, head bent, to light *imphepo*, an incense burned during healing rituals. The cleansing smoke diffuses over the audience, entering their bodies as they inhale, and Shoro begins her poem in an intonation:

Funerals
Sound

Like wailing.

The lighting of *imphepo*, Shoro's resonating voice, and the rest of the performers standing silently behind her, bring the audience physically into the performance, even those that remain seated. The interactivity of the poetry slam has been transformed by the rituals of the *imphepo* into a shared, embodied experience of the breath. Simultaneously a poetry performance and a ritual, the performance is a reminder of the spoken word's many guises and powers: multiple audience members and poets reported feeling a "spiritual calling" during the work. At any given performance, audience members cry, wail and weep, only to come away speaking of catharsis and an inexplicable sense of healing.

After the success of *Umzila ka Moya*, Lingua Franca modified its methods for a workshop, which they integrated with their youth mentorship program. The workshop offers "a pedagogic approach that helps individuals who are longing for a place to belong. […] Through songs, rituals, and indigenous/mother-tongue idioms, each poet goes through a cleansing ceremony by unlearning what was imposed by colonial forces." Since 2015, the group has offered the workshop in Cape Town schools and offices. But first, they offered it to their youth group, encouraging them to develop their own stories and poems as part of their weekly meetings and occasional retreats. One

such poet offered a poem which followed his move from Zimbabwe to South Africa:

Vusumuzi Mpofu's "Foreign Searching for Rain."

In the poem, whose multimedia circulations opened this chapter, Mpofu

embodies national difference, forced to reckon with a new place and a new language.

The poems opens:

> Zimbabwe was burning
> We were burning along with it
> These charcoaled skins we are mocked for are not by accident
> We come from burning homes
>
> Clouds have burnt to ashes
> My people are thirsty
> Migrating to the southern side of the border in search for rain, becoming
> Foreign back home
> We spoke of South Africa as the blessed land where anyone could quench
> their thirst from the plentiful pouring rain

Throughout Mpofu's piece, Zimbabwe and South Africa stand at odds with each other,

each framed through the speaker's imagined understanding of the other and of his own

lost home. As Mpofu enters South African life, the border disappears, and his story

comes into ever-clearer focus as one of migration, displacement, and personal longing.

*Umzila ka Moya,* and Lingua Franca's pedagogical work, offer an alternative

poetic structure that reimagines the potential of the slam poem. It encourages poems

like Mpofu's: inspired by a global poetic trend, realized in local workshops, and using

personal exigencies to address global experiences. Responding to the popularity of slam

poetry, and its attendant emphases on the political elements of personal experience, on

a performative collaborative format, and on the direct and meaningful participation of

audience members, Lingua Franca have produced a multicentric performance form

which incorporates a range of poetic and musical attitudes. Their simple performance

style—relying on acoustic instruments, simple costuming, the flow of individual bodies,

and attentive listening—allows the audience to directly enter the scene, imaginatively

stretching the stage to incorporate the entire performance venue. The performance

becomes a collaborative endeavor, producing a local poetics of engagement through the

global logic of slam.

CONCLUSION: ON THE REGIONAL CIRCULATION OF POETIC NORMS

Lingua Franca's work in *Umzila ka Moya* combines the interactivist ethos of slam,

the social role of local poetry, and the hybrid aesthetics of Cape Town's contemporary

cultural landscape. Poetry slams brought Lingua Franca's members together, and into

the poetry scene, by offering an alternative image of what poetry is and can do. The

slam moved the poem beyond the classroom into a broader social space where it spoke

to current issues in everyday language and an exciting form. By maintaining

participatory culture but doing away with the competition format, Lingua Franca offer

a model of performative poetics which evokes House of Hunger's slams, KwaHaraba's

open mics, and Malewezi's mentorship programs.

Slam has taken on new form as it has spread, becoming local even as it creates a global poetic ethos. In Malawi, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, poets and organizations have adapted the slam poem to the circumstances in which they found it, whether a racially-charged cosmopolitan city, as Lingua Franca have done; a power-plagued coffee shop, where House of Hunger meets; or a tight-knit, geographically-dispersed community, like the ones Malewezi organizes. Its spread has been managed on multiple levels, both through coordinated institutional efforts and through spontaneous individual inspirations. In each place it has traveled, the people inspired by it have used its form, its aesthetic, or its ethos to produce new poetry communities, whether in competition, workshops, or mentorships.

Slam poetry's emphasis on current events and social relevance reflects culturally potent ideas about poetry as producing social affiliations and critiquing social action. Its competitive format and youth-oriented aesthetics, though, have shifted its audience, producing urban communities of young poets who are making new stages for themselves. Its regional rise testifies to the importance of digital circulation and social mediation in contemporary poetic production and communities. The slam poem is, in this sense, not only a form but a meme: a multimedia, fast-spreading, consistent, and localizable cultural idea or ethos. Its spread testifies to the importance of digital circulation and social mediation in contemporary poetic production and communities.

Having demonstrated the role of poetic form in community production in this chapter, I turn in the next chapter to examine the role of the audience in face-to-face interactions within these formations. Drawing together questions of performance, audience expectations, nationalism, and digital virality, this final chapter inerrogates international poetry performance events in South Africa and Zimbabwe, treating them as sites through which poetic agency may be negotiated apart from, yet in tension with, digital sites of production and digital aesthetic norms. I argue that the imagined cosmopolitanism of the contemporary poet comes into tension with the international audience's expectations of an "authentic" performance, staging anew the poet's conscription into the collective logics of the nation.

Chapter 4.

*On Movement and Migration: Poetry Festivals and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism*



*Figure 14. Malawian musician Faith Mussa performing at Tumaini Festival in 2016. Image courtesy of the Tumaini Festival.*

*"But actually, they are people just like us."*

Since 2014, the Tumaini Festival in Dowa, Malawi, has hosted the world's first arts festival within a refugee camp. In Malawi, which had only one refugee camp and which does not allow refugees to hold jobs or live outside the camp, the experiences of the nearly 30,000 people—most of them from Rwanda, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mozambique—living in Dzaleka Refugee Camp remained

largely out of sight from the broader public. But for one day each year, nearly two thousand people come to the camp, not to volunteer or treat the refugees' lives as spectacle, but to see art. During the festival, Dzaleka's daily routines shift, as artists set up tents to sell their work, and performances appear on stages around the camp. For four years, festival founder Menes la Plume (né Trésor Mpauni) has organized poets, musicians, and dancers from Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia to perform for a largely outside audience. Videos from the events testify to the audience's surprise: each audience member takes pains to mention how busy the camp is, how full of life—and how unlike the impoverished world they had envisioned. The performances reflect the artists' diverse national and cultural backgrounds, with renditions of Rwandan dance and Congolaise music. The events bring artists from within Dzaleka together with popular Malawian artists, reminding the visitors that their work could stand together to create a shared artistic world. The arts festival, simultaneously a space of national celebration and cosmopolitan interactions, highlights the role of the international audience in affirming national identities. Ironically, this role is heightened for the stateless artist, for whom the festival becomes a space of individual agency in a cosmpolitical community.

Where Tumaini offers refugee poets—otherwise stateless subjects— cosmopolitical agency, other festivals produce a more vexed response to poetry's

cosmopolitan imaginary. In this chapter, I examine Tumaini alongside the South

African festival Poetry Africa and the Malawian festival Lake of Stars to illustrate how

poets navigate between the cosmopolitan imaginaries of digital publication and the

fetishizing demands for "authentic" performances that tie the poet to his or her national

identity. Poetry Africa, the oldest and largest poetry festival on the continent, brings a

range of poets from around the world to perform for South African audiences. Lake of

Stars, a music festival founded in 2003, puts Malawian artists on stages aimed at

attracting international tourists. In each case, performance festivals become sites of

poetic community formation in which the particular anxieties of digital interactions—

anxieties about identity and authenticity, about urgency and reactivity, and about

community and connection—are worked out.

Poets at arts festivals today must negotiate the often-contradictory demands of a

networked public sphere. Publishing for international audiences requires that poets

offer relatively universalist poems, but performing for an audience of cosmopolitan

tastes require that they perform a native authenticity. Poets must thus navigate what

Eileen Julien has called an "extroverted" gaze, at once universalizing and particular. If,

as Julien has argued, the "extroverted novel" is the means by which African identities

are constructed and reified for a simultaneously national and transnational audience,

the poetry festival is a space to experience those identities, staging "'Global' practices

and institutions [which] become the means of expressing local identities and values on a world stage" (682). Poetry performances offer a site through which embodied national identities are performed both for co-nationals and for the rest of the world (cf. Lwanda 2004). Thus, if the canon of African literature has been constructed through "border crossing" works, rather than through the work of literature in situ, arts festivals offer a uniquely reified space of cultural reception, one in which to perform and realize an Afro-centric cosmopolitanism. In order to understand contemporary poetry performances, then, we must read them as performances of nationhood to an audience that is simultaneously highly local and (imagined to be) entirely cosmopolitan. The "cosmopolitan" is a way of framing contemporary imaginaries about the transnational situation of the national subject.

At festivals, poets become representatives for their social group, compelled to share the expertise of specific experience with an inexperienced audience. The question of authenticity, performance, and identity are worked out in the moment of reception. As Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs have argued, these moments must be understood through a process of entextualization, reading the text and its context—or the artistic production and its reception—as mutually co-constitutive.  The space of the arts festival brings questions of audience, community, and performance to the foreground of the poetry itself. As a cosmopolitan space which at once denies and

fetishizes difference, the arts festival brings together poets and audiences from across a wide range of social and geographical space to offer access to an imagined universal public sphere—but one which imbalanced access to meaning and power. Because of that co-constitution, careful attention to both the setting of the performance and the cultural context of the festival is necessary.

In this chapter, I interrogate the cosmopolitan imaginary produced by the contemporary arts festival in southern Africa. As I have argued throughout this project, poetry offers a language of affiliation. Through its address, it establishes a community. Through its generic norms, it establishes connections to a history of poetic production. And through its performance, it offers an image of the poet as maker, as world-builder. But in the space of the arts festival, in particular, poetry performance offers audiences a version of poetic authenticity that allows them to claim an idealized form of cosmopolitan engagement. Interrogating the poet's position within the structure of Poetry Africa, Lake of Stars, and Tumaini reveals that the festivals themselves structure audience expectations and, thus, the range of possibility for poets to either perform authenticity or else resist cultural voyeurism. This chapter therefore argues that the poetry festival stages a contradictory space which simultaneously enables the performance of cosmopolitan engagements and reifies poets' attachment to inalienable national identities.

After providing a history of poetry and arts festivals in the twentieth and twenty-first century, this chapter analyses audience-poet interactions at Poetry Africa and Lake of Stars to demonstrate how poets navigate the festivals' structural constraints and audiences' expectations. These analyses establish the paradoxical demand for "authenticity" that emerges from the cosmopolitan imaginaries staged at arts festivals—a paradox I explore further in the vexed presentation of marginalized identities at Poetry Africa and Tumaini. Together, these scenes suggest a reading of cosmopolitanism that takes into account contemporary demands for local specificity.

THE POETRY FESTIVAL AND THE NEW NATION

In many ways, poetry festivals evoke an imagined origin point for poetic production by bringing a community together to hear poetry from its source. They establish interpretations of poetry's meaning, where it comes from, and what it can do. The contemporary festival tradition emerges from nineteenth century arts festivals in Europe—a middle class attempt to reimagine and reclaim a nationalist folk identity. At the same time, poetry offered a language for the European and Euro-American nation to identify itself and claim its history (Aberbach 2003, Hoffman 2011). Pascale Casanova has traced the rapid rise of national literatures in this time to "these dominated areas within Europe," which had suffered under internal empires, because, "already by the time the first nationalist claims began to be asserted in the nineteenth century they had

accumulated sufficient assets of their own to cause upheavals that were registered in

the centers, upsetting the old hierarchies of the established literary order" (84). Thanks

to such Herderian nationalisms, "Literary institutions, academies, school syllabuses, the

canon—all these things now having become instruments of national identity, the idea of

dividing up national literatures on the exact model of political units began to acquire a

sort of natural appeal and, indeed, inevitability" (105).

Within this broader landscape, the international poetry festival emerges in a

moment of troubled nationalism, as failing empires and emerging anti-colonial

movements sought to define themselves for their own people and for a broader,

international world. They often did so through poetry and epics, forms which have

historically been pressed into service as the prototypical national form. As David

Aberbach has noted in his histories of poetry and nationalism, many poets embraced

this role, writing poems that treat the country or the nation with love and admiration

(2010), but many more found themselves read in nationalist terms despite ambivalent

personal attachments to the nation (2003). Matthew Hart contends that, beginning

among the high modernist poets of the early twentieth century, print poetry moved

from being implicitly or contentiously nationalist to being explicitly, deliberately, and

often confrontationally national. What Hart calls "synthetic vernaculars"—a printed,

reified version of the vernacular, or, in Bauman's terms, an entextualization of folk

speech—allowed poets to claim and reframe national identities, creating nations from

their poetic projects. This was especially important for poets who worked across

national contexts: Hart identifies T.S. Eliot, Kamau Brathwaite, and Melvin Tolson as

among the progenitors of synthetic vernaculars precisely because of their insistence on

a transnational, cosmopolitan nationalism. The writers Hart describes move

internationally, often contending with their position as speakers of either "minor" or

"major" vernaculars within implicit power structures but from a physical and social

position outside their nation of birth, citizenship, or education.

These movements, as staged in the poetry festival, offered a cosmopolitan ideal

of poetics, one which is eminently translatable and brings together poets and audiences

from across national spaces to create a form of global community. Perhaps

unsurprisingly, then, one of the most immediate precursors for the contemporary

poetry festival is the advent of twentieth century liberal cosmopolitanism, which

espouses the virtue, if not necessity, of intercultural exchange in and across urban

centers. As anti-colonial movements mounted in the Global South, and European

countries strove to redefine themselves following WWII, arts festivals brought together

these contrasting ideals in a tenuous binding of corporate sponsorship and radical

idealism, a partnership that persists today. The prototypical festival of this period was

the Edinburgh International Festival, which began in 1947 to showcase the range of

Scottish artistic and cultural products to the broader European and Anglophone

worlds.[1] The festival was marked by a tension between artistic radicalism and

commercial authorization from the beginning, though: within two years, avant-garde

and popular artists excluded from the official festival began a "fringe" festival which

has since eclipsed the original International Festival.

In southeastern Africa, poetry festivals evoke a connection between poetry and

cultural norms. This connection comes from both internal and external cultural forces.

John Lwanda, Ruben Chirambo, and Jeff Opland, among others, have established the

centrality of poetry to nationalist endeavors in the colonial and independence eras.

Praise poetry, in particular, was empowered to tell histories and thus create a

community connected by that history, even as it "attempts to orate through writing"

(Sitas 149). Independence leaders turned to praise poetry to suggest popular support for

their cause. Poetry was thus connected to popular performances and political claims.

On the other end, as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Gauri Viswanathan have

demonstrated, literature in general, and poetry in particular, was an important

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[1] In her history of the Edinburgh international festival, Angela Bartie points out both the tensions that had inhered in the festival's programming from the beginning as well as the underlying, linking values. She writes, "When it began in 1947, the Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama encapsulated many of the new values given to culture in the immediate post-war world: a means of spiritual refreshment, a way of reasserting moral values, of rebuilding relationships between nations, of shoring off European civilization and of providing 'welfare' in its broadest sense" (Bartie 2)

component of the British colonial project. At home and in their colonies, the British used

poetry to spread English culture and teach colonial behavior, promoting what Kwame

Dawes has referred to as "the colonial genius" for "constructing a myth of greatness"

(2012, 295). Anti-colonial agitators turned this genius against their oppressors, using

poetry to prove their cultural worth and well-being. In South Africa, in particular,

students and teachers at missionary schools brought English and indigenous literary

traditions to the broader cultural and political fight against colonial impositions

(Magaziner 2010). These poetic uses became popular at political rallies and strikes,

where they entertained protestors as days dragged on (Sitas 2018), before consolidating

into formal festivals by the mid-1980s.

Today, arts festivals proliferate across the continent. They continue to exhibit a

tension between artistic experimentation and institutional consolidation, as artists and

funders alike work to present a wide range of arts and to promote sometimes

contradictory political norms. The festivals have become a site of cultural tourism and

exchange, promoting twentieth century ideals of cosmopolitanism even as they

confront twenty-first century anxieties about authenticity, exoticism, and cultural

tourism. Whether local visitors in search of the best their community can attract or

tourists looking for the best the community has produced, attendees turn to festivals for

snapshots of the local cultural scene. This contemporary cosmopolitanism appeals to

digital logics of accessibility, csating the impossible demand that local authenticity be made legible to a universalist audience. Performing a national self for an international audience, the poet at the arts festival offers a cosmopolitan vision of poetry's translatability—even as she invariably flags her own poetry as in need of translation.

Arts festivals are ultimately diplomatic events. They show off the host community's best artists, as well as its ability to draw together and support great poets from across the world or target region. The expansion of these nationalist events in the twenty-first century reflects an anxiety about growing transnationalism and global cosmopolitanism, which threaten the nation's exceptionalism. Festivals therefore highlight the nation's position relative to its neighbors and within the world. The poetry at them becomes as much a product as a statement, a way of making cultural claims and an option for consumers to select in their representations of here and of elsewhere. Cultural tourism at poetry festivals requires that poets perform themselves directly, on stage, to an audience that demands authenticity. As Norie Neumark points out, the emphasis on authenticity has grown in the confrontation with digital media, the distance and accessibility of which provokes anxiety about the content producers's identity (95). In an African context, though, this digital emphasis on "authenticity" recapitulates colonialist fetishizations of the "authentic" African.

The festival legitimates certain cultural producers, implicitly establishing norms for political and cultural engagement. They confer upon the invited artists what Heather Inwood has labeled "cultural citizenship": "Being a poet-citizen […] involves declaring membership in a broader poetry community through participation across multiple media spaces, adherence to specific interpretive strategies for reading and writing poems, and being recognized as a poet-citizen by other poets, critics, and academics" (Inwood 8). But festivals also require that poets appeal to an unknowably broad audience—one both immediately present at the festival itself and reaching into futurity, for the festival's archives. Building on the transnational audience-poet interactions it produces, the poetry festival places the poet at the center of a cultural "contact zone," where, Mary Louise Pratt writes, "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). Moreover, by deciding who to let in, the festival implicitly determines what sorts of poetry, or of art, merit attention in the first place. The poetry festival makes reception primary, embedding the audience in the space and network of the festival itself.

Poetry festivals retain their power because they promise direct access to the lived reality of poetry: to the poet themselves.[2] They bear witness to the cultural products of a people or movement and declare the importance of all things cultural. They work to make those things accessible to a public who may or may not want them. Festivals are events of and for history: even as they seek to exhibit the best of everything, they also must record that best. As communal spaces for poetic reception, these events are inevitably concerned with their own archive.

In the obsessive archives of social media, which are both indelible and yet functionally illegible, festivals continue to archive themselves, to project themselves forward into a past they are busy creating. Social media publication allows poetry festivals' advertisements and archives to blend seamlessly with a wider array of cultural products, potentially even removing them from their national contexts. As reading cultures evolve, poets' popularity on social media itself acts as a marker of social currency for festival organizers. Social media popularity can further enhance a viral poet's cultural cache by getting her invited to the festival itself. Festivals' digital

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[2] As Peter Middleton (2010) and John Lwanda (2004) have written of poetry performance in the US and Malawi, respectively, live performance continues to be read by audiences as offering closer access to poetry's true meaning, embodied in the poet herself. Rozita Dimova has provided particularly strong evidence for this in her analysis of the Struga Poetry Festival in Macedonia, describing the appeal of hearing poets read their own works: "one could not fail to notice the shared energy of the poets seated on the bridge, or the emotions of their voices, which shimmered with their love for the written and spoken word when they recited verses in their native language" (2013, 141)

engagement is thus cyclic: poetic virality influences which poets take the stage, and the digital archives they manage in turn influence who goes viral.

Yet poetry festivals support types of interactions and meaning-making that exceed the digital, creating and securing interpersonal connections beyond what is possible in purely digital spaces. They constitute spaces in which canonicity, pedagogic practice, and the hard-won realities of artistic life butt up against each other as artists, organizers, policy-makers, and everyday literary audiences are brought into one another's circles.[3] At poetry festivals, poets are expected, simultaneously, to represent a universal subjectivity, to communicate the poet's individual experience, and to reflect some essential poetic nationhood—to, in sum, create a synthetic nation that reads as universal. There, poets are contextualized relative to other poets, the audience, and the location. They are either local or distant; familiar or exotic; knowable or alien; canonical or emerging. Their work comes to stand in for them as individuals, and vice versa. Where digital poetry is framed by the implicit possibility of connection, the poetry festival isolates individual performers in order to re-contextualize them and thus forge novel connections. They are transformed, in this sense, into a cosmopolitical subject,

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[3] If, as Eileen Julien has demonstrated, the so-called "African novel" is that which is taught in schools, this pedagogical canonicity has its limits: Molly Abel Travis writes of South African efforts to rebuild national curricula in the post-apartheid era, "Building a national reading culture is difficult enough, but—as John Guillory's cogent analysis of the effects of confusing school culture with national culture shows—constructing a national culture through school reading is impossible" (2012: 91).

one at the mercy simultaneously of their own state and of the judgement of a global, if implicitly metropolitan, audience. Nonetheless, as Lazarus declares:

> To be at home in the world is not only to be travelled and 'worldly', it is to be capable of retaining one's centre of gravity, one's ability to be oneself, wherever in the world might be. One is not born, but made cosmopolitan. To inhabit cosmopolitanism as a structure of feeling, one has to develop a critical faculty and to assume command of the affective and institutional means of using it. (119-120)

Festival performances implicitly empower poets to perform their cosmopolitanism precisely through their inhabitance of a specific, locally grounded, national subjecthood. Turning to examine the interactive poetics and digital cosmopolitanisms which shape the contemporary arts festival, I ask how, precisely, these poems position their national authority—and how the contexts of their publication, performance, and reception interpolate them relative to the nation's possibilities. At Poetry Africa, the institution of the university takes precedence over the performance, compelling poets and audience members to adhere to its norms in their communication.

CREATING POETRY'S AUDIENCES AT *POETRY AFRICA* 2016

Poetry Africa's audience sit quietly in auditorium seats. Neatly separated into rows and columns by chair backs and armrests, their bodies and movements duly constrained, just under 200 people laugh in time with the poet who jokes about his experiences traveling between Zimbabwe and South Africa. We gasp in response to the

poet Mata-Uiroa Manuel Atan, who takes the stage wearing a loin cloth, chanting in

Rapa Nui, a language familiar to no one in the room. Yet it is largely in our silence that

we experience the poetry, and in our silence that we become aware of our own

individual smallness in the room full of sound. Even though Poetry Africa includes a

wide range of poetry and performance styles, and even though it is a rare festival

dedicated purely to poetry, the audience of students, academic, and intellectuals who

had come for an evening's entertainment behaved as the auditorium venue compelled

them to behave. Poetry Africa has positioned itself as a celebration of pan-African

cosmopolitanism, and yet in doing so, it principally celebrates the host country's own

exceptionalism.

A week-long annual festival running since 1997, Poetry Africa is the largest and

oldest poetry festival on the continent. Each year, the organizers—based at the

University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN)'s Centre for the Creative Arts (CCA)—invite

poets from around the world to a weeklong residency in Durban. While there, the poets

perform each night to an audience of students and local enthusiasts each night at the

university's large Elizabeth Sneddon auditorium. During the day, they travel around

Durban, holding poetry workshops, giving performances, and attending events at

primary and secondary schools, community centers, local arts organizations, and

prisons. The festival thus brings together poetry-oriented audiences with community-

and arts-oriented groups. Each year, too, different poets are invited to the festival,

reflecting shifting trends in poetry style and popularity. The poets who participate are,

by and large, well-established writers and performers who regularly attend

international festivals. Nonetheless, in interviews and during performances, many

remarked that Poetry Africa stood out among its peers: they said that it uniquely

reminded them of poetry's ability to transform social relationships.

Poetry Africa grows out of a moment, and a space, when poetry's political and

social roles exceeded historical precedent. In 1994, just before the founding of Poetry

Africa, poet, organizer, and sociologist Ari Sitas wrote, "We have been facing a 'brilliant

chaos' of words, for the last few years have been tremendous for poetry in Natal. But

we have also been reeling from collisions between two poetic traditions, a scripted and

an oral one. And both traditions have been colliding in the context of political and

labour initiatives in the area" (138). As poets sought out venues for Black performance

arts, they were denied access to public performance spaces. Bhekiziwe Peterson wrote:

> The paucity of performance venues is the result of the state's policy that black
> cultural practices had to be catered for by their respective racial or ethnic
> administrations. Since urban Africans were regarded, in accordance with
> Verweordian[4] ideology, as temporary sojourners en route, hopefully, to their
> respective ethnic homelands, no encouragement was to be given that would
> contradict this eventuality. (39)

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[4] Hendrik Verwoerd (1901-1966) was Prime Minister of South Africa from 1958-1966 and is widely
considered the mastermind behind apartheid.

Poetry Africa, sponsored by one of the few spaces that had both the funds and the desire to promote Black arts initiatives, brought together a range of performance styles and histories onto a single stage to reflect the post-apartheid "rainbow nation."

Poetry Africa began, in part, as a national venue for poets of African descent to highlight South Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity following apartheid. It retains a nationalist orientation that speaks to a common phenomenon across arts festivals: the hosting institution, and more broadly the hosting country, is always the primary focus of the festival, of the artists who perform at it, and of the audience who show up at it. This is especially tangible in the case of arts festivals hosted in South Africa. South Africa dominates the region economically and culturally, with the second largest economy on the continent and six of the ten best-ranked universities in Africa. The festival's connection to UKZN, and to South Africa's arts industries more broadly, make it a particularly appealing venue for both emerging and established poets, since it offers entry into South Africa's literary networks. Despite the festival's international focus, well over half of poets who attend are still from South Africa.

The 2016 festival featured 13 poets from within South Africa, six from elsewhere in Africa, and four from beyond the continent. The kick-off performance, which was hosted at the university's large Elizabeth Sneddon Theater, was held on a Monday evening—not poetry's prime time. Nonetheless, the large 413-seat auditorium was

nearly two-thirds full. The event had been heavily advertised throughout Durban and was highly anticipated as one of the CCA's three large annual festivals. That night, though, poetry did not hold center stage for long: after a short performance by King Goodwill Zwelethini kaBhekuzulu's praise singer in honor of the Zulu nation's bicentennial, the event was turned over to festival organizers and university bureaucrats. The evening became an opportunity for the twenty people on stage—royalty, organizers, retired poets, and university administrators, all of whom knew one another—to celebrate each other's efforts, to declaim honors, and to defend the university's responses to the recent protests (discussed in chapter 1).

Through these speeches and prizes, the festival established its credentializing capacity—its power to make taste, to legitimize certain poetic forms, to keep gates. Yet, as this project has shown, the audience's own goals can shape the event beyond organizers' intentions, and even at a formal event such as Poetry Africa. Audience members sped unpopular speeches along with their silence and encouraged popular ones to continue with cheers. Even as poetry itself was put on a back-burner, the crowd made it clear that they had come prepared to respond to poetry—and they responded to the speeches they liked accordingly. One audience member, a professor of political science at the university, called out in isiZulu to reinforce speakers' excitement about the twenty years of success for Poetry Africa. She often started cheers and ululations

that spread throughout the crowd. The cheers split the crowd between those who could speak, understand, or at least follow isiZulu and those who could not, audibly affirming the nation's and province's ongoing cultural and linguistic split. But even with linguistic comprehension firmly dividing the audience, the excitement spread throughout the crowd, and more and more people called out their support or derision of the speech-makers as the evening progressed. Bringing populist feedback mechanisms into the sphere of high culture, the audience's behavior can reinforce or negate the festival's capacity to authorize certain forms of performance and to confer cultural capital.

After nearly two hours of speeches and introductions—as the crowd thinned and the remaining audience grew restless—the event was turned over to the poets, each of whom would perform for five minutes. By that point in the evening, the audience was tired, their energy expended on lectures about the history of the program, the honor of the amaZulu, the troubles of the young generation, and the university crisis. But as the poets took the stage in sequence, each one reading or performing their highest energy, most engaging poem, the audience gradually came back to attentiveness. More people cheered for each subsequent poet, gaining energy from one another's emotional output and coalescing into an affective public.

Halfway through the introductory performances, even the drowsiest audience member had become attentive. When a slight woman with a calm demeanor took the stage to talk about a taboo topic—female sexuality—the audience was keyed in, leaning forward, ready for her performance. The poet, Roché Kester, had first made a name for herself as a slam poet in Cape Town. The poem she performed that night, together with her composed bearing, blends shock and outrage into empathy and excitement to produce a personal poem with political implications. Every time Kester introduces the poem, its title, "Premium Poes,"[5] draws giggles of discomfort and excitement from her audience, and Poetry Africa's audience was no exceptional. The poem is about female sexuality, "reclaiming the P word," as Kester puts it, and defining personal boundaries. In it, Kester addresses her audience directly, implicating them simultaneously as co-conspirators and as part of a broader oppressive social apparatus. She begins with a question:

> Give it up?
> What do you mean—give it up?
> Give *(points to her crotch)* her up? Just like that?
> Disregard her, as if she deserves no respect?
> Just to inform you, the only giving up will occur when I'm secure
>         that the language is pure
> And even more so, that every part of me is sure.
> Now—don't get me wrong.
> I'm not—prissy or—pompous
> But my pussy needs fluent talk

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[5] Afrikaans slang for vagina, from the Dutch *poes* meaning cat. Generally used derogatorily.

> Passionate, poetic, articulate conversation, soulful words, powerful chatter,
>     an art of rhetoric consisting of intellect
> And mutual respect, because these lips
> Don't speak to just anyone.

Like many slam poems, "Premium Poes" relies on an exaggerated performance of the self, an identity between speaker and performer which promises the audience that the experiences they hear are genuine ones, part of a broader constellation of experiences with which the audience can empathize. The poem's focus on sounds and bodily performance flattens the distinction between speaker and poet, an indistinction Kester's direct address to the audience encourages. This identity creates a sense of intimacy and connection between poet and audience.

Throughout Kester's performance at Poetry Africa, the audience responded enthusiastically—especially female audience members, whose cheers drowned out murmurs of discomfort. The poem becomes increasingly explicit as it continues, asserting a woman's right to choose her sexual comfort with unusual forthrightness:

> I'm talking about preem-yum poes
> Top of the range, not to be exchanged with vulgar laughter
> to satisfy him and his thing *(pointing to her crotch)*
> No profanities when speaking to her
> No jab-bing con-ver-sation that is *(thrusts her hips to mark the rhythm)*
> Short lived and lacking in content

Her expressive movements keep time with the accelerating rhythm, which directs the audience's laughter and cheers with orchestral precision. Her audience is so carefully

managed and emotionally in sync with her that, by the end, Kester turns to them for a

call-and-response, allowing them to fill in the blank of her pun:

> It's a choice
> A choice of quality
> Because not any Tom—
> > *she pauses as the audience laughs, cheers, and shouts:*
> > > Dick!
> Or Harry is gonna infiltrate the sanctity of my punani[6]

The pause interrupts the rhythm of the sequence, disrupting its aesthetic coherence in

order to enhance its performative impact. By integrating the audience's voice into the

sequence, Kester both showcases her skill as a performer and demonstrates their

agreement. "Premium Poes" reclaims a word, a series of gestures, and ultimately, a

choice, all while carefully managing audience responses through identity performance

and puns. Kester uses humor and shared cultural references to carry the audience

through an often-contentious subject, until they even shout along with her, bringing

their own voices into the poem.

As in the storytelling techniques of question-and-answer, audience interactions

ensure and verify continued attention. They shape the performance itself, giving

audiences a hand in the length and breadth of a narrative. Audience responsiveness in

performance speaks, then, to the broader role of reception in performance—or what

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[6] Hindi-derived Jamaican slang for female genitalia

Bauman and Briggs point to as "co-performance." Bauman and Briggs remind us of

"the active role that hearers also play in performances. In conversational narratives,

audience members are often accorded turns at talk, thus rendering narration

coperformance" (70). "Performance," they write, "the enactment of poetic function, is a

highly reflexive mode of communication" (73). That performance, like all verbal modes,

is inherently interactive enables the audience to curate their own festivals. Verbal

interactions are invariably shaped in the interface between producer and consumer, or

artist and audience—an interaction which manages and shapes a piece's poetic

endeavors.[7] Nonetheless, many contemporary poetry performances separate poem and

audience: maintaining the style of twentieth century poetry readings, poets interact

with the audience only when introducing or explaining the poem. When reciting the

poem itself, they maintain a relatively flat affect, and leave no space for audience

response (Middleton 2005).

Kester's poetry represents a relatively trendy and youthful performance style,

showcasing the potential of this style to promote audience engagement. Poetry Africa

itself evinces a wide range of contemporary poetry performance styles: at the 2016

festival, performances included several musicians, poets reading from published books,

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[7] "Poetics," in this case, refers to Roman Jakobson's use of the term (1960), to indicate the power of language as-such, in contrast to language-as-performative.

a handful of slam poets like Kester, an imbongi, and a dancer/poet. Audiences

responded to the cues of the poets whose style they could recognize: scattered audience

members throughout the theater ululated and called back to Jessica Mbangeni's isiZulu

praise poems, bringing the performance into the seats themselves; others snapped and

cheered in response to slam poets, or sang along with the musicians; and most sat

quietly during the formal readings. Poetic genre cued audience behavior, as did careful

signaling in the poets' postures, their tone, and their gestures.

Poet and audience then work together to create experiential meaning. But

audiences at Poetry Africa have to be versed in responding to a wide range of

performance styles, and for this, they take their cues for one another as much as from

the poet herself. When Zulu praise poet Jessica Mbangeni performed during the

opening night, for instance, a few audience members called out isiZulu responses to her

formulated questions and ululated in recognition of her emotions. The next time she

performed, though, during a 30-minute set a few days later, many more joined in—not

always articulately, but responsively, prepared by what they had heard before.

Similarly, during the first musical performance—Lucky Thembu's playful mbira

songs—it took several beats for the audience to abandon their interpretive silence and

engage the sounds on their own terms.

I do not want to imply, however, that the audience-poet interactions at these events are monodirectional, with poets signaling to their audiences and either succeeding or failing to elicit proper responses. Rather, poets' relationships to their audiences had been shaped in the process that led to their selection, even before the festival began. Over the past decade, Poetry Africa has included an increasing number of young poets who gained acclaim in untraditional ways. Their introductions provide insight into the curatorial process. At the first night, the events' organizer explained that each poet would give a "taste" of their work—and to help facilitate that taste, he told the audience the poets' backgrounds. Each published poet was introduced in terms of her publications, whether in number of volumes or in journals; each musician in terms of her performance style and accolades. The slam poets, though, were introduced by their championship titles or—less commonly but no less strikingly—by their YouTube followers. In 2016, three poets —Roche Kester, Maya Wegerif, and poet Bassey Ikpi— were introduced through their novel digital and social engagements: Wegerif as a "viral poet," whose work gained popularity and notoriety on YouTube; Kester for her work developing and marketing a poetry open mic in Cape Town; and Ikpi as a "slam poet," famous for her performances on the HBO show Def Jam Poetry. Audiences, before they determined the reception at the festival itself, helped determine who got to the festival in the first place: for instance, Wegerif's viral poem "Why You Talk So White," which

she published as a YouTube video, helped bring the young poet to the attention of a

wide array of events organizers in the US and Africa, including the organizers at Poetry

Africa. These poets' audiences know how to respond to them, and what to expect from

their work, because they had heard its kind before.

Taking the piece's message into their own bodies and projecting it back out

through their voices, the audience gives new life to a poem, allowing it to echo into

longer and deeper afterlives—a legacy embedded in the festival's archives. Every

performance that has taken place at Poetry Africa since 2011 has been archived on their

YouTube channel, managed by the CCA. Yet audience responses are practically

inaudible in the videos: the festival's imagined future, its sense of its own history,

allows no space for the live audience. It creates a poetic past of empty homogeneous

cosmopolitanism, onto which an internationalist future can be projected.[8] As of 2018,

Poetry Africa's YouTube channel is among the largest archives of African poetry

performance anywhere. Due to their size and accessibility, such YouTube archives are

helping to shape the aesthetic norms of poetry today, integrating text, video, and sound

recordings, and inviting direct audience feedback in forms immediately familiar to

social media users. In many ways, Poetry Africa's YouTube presence takes the place of

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[8] Pheng Cheah provides a history of the literary fashioning of the postcolonial nation-state through the *bildungsroman* in his *Spectal Nationality* (Columbia UP, 2003).

the sort of print anthologies which have traditionally emerged from annual literary festivals. Where other major poetry festivals, like Poetry International in Rotterdam, mark their progression by creating biographical pages in ever-expanding websites for each of the poets who performs on their stages, Poetry Africa creates an ever-expanding documentary experience for the viewers who follow its publication. By publishing on YouTube, Poetry Africa engages the networked logics of contemporary literary production. It acknowledges its own position in a moment when poetry is increasingly driven by multimedia communication and, thus, by multimedia performance.

Despite the careful curation of Poetry Africa's digital presence, audience members and performers still use their phones to record their personal experiences of the events. Alone among poetry events I have ever attended, Poetry Africa discourages this, reprimanding audience members who use their phones to record the events. Nonetheless, social media-trained audiences look through their phones to experience and engage with the events. Each year, Twitter explodes with audiences mentioning poets, tweeting at the event organizers, or both. More noticeably, the poets themselves use social media platforms to build their own brands. The public or semi-public connections they make to other poets—tagging themselves in photos together, following one another on Twitter, becoming friends on Facebook—brings their names and faces onto the feeds of one another's followers. The festival invitation itself

legitimates their names, but social media networks amplify them, giving them the direct

support of a single individual trusted by their followers. Their attendance at Poetry

Africa lent the festival credibility, showing that it could represent and attract a full

range of the moment's most influential poets. It also lent them a deeper credibility,

demonstrating their resonance across national and cultural positions—their weight on

an international stage. This is the reason for revisiting the poetry festival in the twenty-

first century: the problem of creating authenticity, and of curating identity, in an

increasingly connected world.

DIGITAL COSMOPOLITANISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS FESTIVAL

In addition to being the oldest and largest poetry festival in Africa, Poetry Africa

is also among the best publicized festivals, which is how I wound up there. As I

interviewed Malawian poets in 2015, I was struck by their repeated mention of the

festival. Although almost none had been to Poetry Africa, many saw it as a pinnacle of

achievement for the performance poet. The invitation, to them, would signal an entry

point into poetry's recognized mainstream. Just after her performance at Lake of Stars,

Phindu Banda told me:

> A mark [of success] for me would be to perform outside Malawi, and to actually
> be invited there, to get that, 'We would like you to come perform for us.' Because
> usually you have to apply for these things, but to actually get an email, saying,
> Hey Phindu, we want you to come perform at Poetry Africa, I'd be like, Ayy, I
> made it! Also, the BBC one time had this poet from Kenya featured, I remember

> thinking, I'd love to sit on that chair and be interviewed on my work, so that would be, this is it, yes. Drop the mic.

Holding Poetry Africa on a pedestal together with the BBC, Phindu Banda's remark suggested that—above and beyond even Malawi's most prestigious arts festival—Poetry Africa was the site in which poetic success could be negotiated. It was thus situated, discursively, as a key space through which poetry's mainstream was established.

However, as Kester's organizing work and Wegerif's virality suggest, the vectors of power and influence are multidirectional, and official arts events are increasingly bound to the popular taste of social media audiences. We must therefore attend, as Bronwyn Williams has suggested, to the fissures within the production of global cultural capital. As Williams writes of international film festivals, "[t]he growth of multinational corporations, the rapid movement of economic capital, and advanced technologies of communication and transportation have facilitated the expansion of mass popular culture in the same way they have facilitated the expansion of global financial and manufacturing systems" (18). Therefore, she reminds us, "[t]he workings of globalization, in regard to popular culture, are not homogenous or smooth, but are instead marked by connections and gaps, understanding and confusion, acting both in concert with local culture and in opposition to the same culture" (21). The large-scale music and arts festivals that have become increasingly popular in the twenty-first

century illustrate the tension between local celebrations and global culture. The

inclusion of poetry at more of these festivals speaks simultaneously to the poetry's

increasing popularity and to the festivals' desire to tap into poetry's cultural capital.

Unlike Poetry Africa, Malawi's annual Lake of Stars festivals is not

predominantly a poetry festival; its main attractions are musical. It is a 3-day concert

series, without the talks, readings, or awards typical of the poetry festival. Structurally,

Lake of Stars represents the norm for arts festivals around the world. Music festivals,

which generally bring audiences and stage musical acts from around the world, are

more numerous and more profitable than poetry festivals. As poetry has increasingly

mingled with popular performance forms, arts festivals have increasingly included it in

their purview. Its interactions with music and dance render it legible to the art festival

audiences. The arts intermingle, reflecting their porous boundaries, and supporting

Jahan Ramazani's claim that "[i]ntergeneric dialogue has been an especially

pronounced feature of poetry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries,

when media spectacle and mass-reproduced or digitally circulated texts, sounds, and

images have increasingly permeated the private spaces once thought to be poetry's

preserve" (10). As poetry becomes popular online, as slam poetry's performance styles

influence the performances of print poets, and as spoken word artists integrate music

and movement into their performances, poetry shares the stage with musicians, encouraging further intergeneric innovations.

Poetry's inclusion at arts festivals and the rapid growth of independent poetry festivals signal and enhance poetry's shifting cultural position by bringing poetry's cultural capital to the popular arts scene. The arts festival illustrates the connections poetry forges. It shows how poetry's emotional impact, its performance, and its form draw viewers together into an audience—one motivated to take part in the poem's message. This can happen because of the message itself, because of the poem's format, or because of the medium of publication. But it is also an effect of performance, of the co-presence of audience and performer and of the power of voice, body, movement, and emotion together to cross media and create audiences.

Performances put the full weight of a poem's message on the moment of reception, and on the performer's person, in a manner that is obscured in the more mediated contexts of print or film work. In this sense, the poetry festival resists the digitization of poetry by occupying a broader poetic ecology within which poets and audiences come to recognize, know, and engage one another. It is this last effect that comes to the fore in arts festivals, which purport to bring together the best artists each nation has to offer the world, packaged and curated for whoever it can attract. The arts festival—like the poetry slam, and like social media platforms—is invariably a

commercial entity. Yet—and, again, like poetry slams and social media platforms—it purports to exceed commercial valuation, offering cultural value, community, and historical connections. From this vantage, the poetry festival occupies a curiously powerful position. Unlike the protest poem, the poetry slam, or the social media poem, each of which penetrates and punctuates everyday life, the poetry festival is a time set apart from everyday life, which sanctifies and authorizes poetic distinction.

CREATING POETRY'S NORMS AT *LAKE OF STARS* 2016

At Malawi's annual Lake of Stars festival, poets feature alongside musical acts to claim their place in the nation's popular culture. A thousand miles from Poetry Africa, two hundred people shuffle against one another, pressing towards a platform stage set up a hundred meters from Lake Malawi's glittering waters. The crowd thrums with an energy of expectation, still thrilled from the last performance and anxious to hear the next. Framed between the stage's sunset orange platform beams and a woven roof, slam poet Q. Malewezi introduces Lily Banda, who answers the audience's cheers with her own effervescent alto. Her poem opens with a gospel-style song, as she sings, "Created in the image of the *most* high," before considering women's struggles with body image, entering a venue wearing too-small red high heels, "Squeezed my being for that moment I walk in … The shoe/nothing like this red soil I walk on." The poem is new, but by the third refrain, a few people pick up on the theme and shout along. The

audience is drawn together by Lily Banda's energy, by the rhythm of her piece, and by

their own excitement at being together, in this place, to hear poetry sung out. Her

poems do not speak to an anonymous second person, but directly to the audience

receiving them. As the audience shouts out their reactions, the poem grows in meaning,

its varied references and allusions expanded by each listener's responses. The

exaggerated vocal cadences and the physical gestures which emphasize Lily Banda's

embodied presence position the audience to respond directly to the performer: they can

predict the next beat, the next poetic move, so that the poet becomes a conductor, the

audience her orchestra. The crowd—a diverse mix of people who have come to Malawi

from across Africa, Europe, and America for the annual festival—coalesces into a single

audience through the poem.

Lake of Stars is Malawi's largest arts festival, an annual event featuring

performance and visual arts. Founded in 2003 by Englishman Will Jameson and

sponsored by Scottish and Malawian NGOs as well as several major international

corporations, the festival offers Malawian artists exposure to a larger audience than

they could have drawn on their own. According to official festival promotions, Jameson

wanted "to raise money for a developing economy, help promote Malawi as a tourist

destination and expose Malawian artists to an international audience." Lake of Stars has

been hugely successful in international outreach: as of 2015, 34% of the 2350 visitors

were non-Malawian.[9] The festival's official publications highlight this success by quoting from international publications. These publications situate Lake of Stars primarily relative to other festivals: one describes it as among the "top 20 festivals in the world" (The Independent), another as "one of Africa's most respected music festivals" (CNN). Otherwise, reviews imagine the festival in terms of tourism: "a fascinating opportunity to experience the pulse of this inspiring country" (The Independent). The festival pitches itself as, first, a world class music venue; and, second, a nationalist venue showcasing Malawi's outstanding qualities, and "launch[ing] young Malawian talent" (Mail & Guardian).

Despite the international audiences, all the poets who have performed at Lake of Stars have been Malawian, in keeping with the festival's aims to showcase Malawian art: according to director Hector Macpherson, each year's festival includes 50% Malawian artists, 30% African artists, and 20% non-African artists (personal interview). Poetry's presence at Lake of Stars, then, is both a confirmation of the form's relevance for a younger audience and a declaration of the value and strength of Malawian poetry for a global audience. Yet the poetry that features at Lake of Stars reflects the festival's audience more than it reflects the Malawian poetry scene: while Malawi has a number of popular page poets, only spoken word artists have appeared at Lake of Stars, because

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[9] These numbers come from the festival's own reporting, which may be skewed.

these are the artists whose work is legible in a popular music venue. The combination reminds the world of Malawi's connections to a global arts network that often ignores the small nation, positioning its artists as cosmopolitan subjects.

In that sense, Lake of Stars lays bare a basic logic of arts festivals in general and of literary festivals in particular: a way of claiming national importance in front of, for, and relative to an international audience. Such cultural diplomacy is, in Julien's sense, an extroverted performance, appropriating external genres and discourses to declare the value of the local to the international. Yet such cultural diplomacy also risks essentializing national identities, requiring poets to perform their nationhood for an international, othering audience. This is a logic that novelist and publisher Shadreck Chikoti has articulated especially well. Chikoti, whose anthology of African speculative fiction, *Imagine Africa 500*, included Malawian, Ugandan, South African, and Nigerian writers, explained he wanted to include a wide range of writers to prove to Malawians and foreigners alike that Malawians could compete on an international stage—that they were good enough and deserved inclusion (personal interview). And, indeed, the festival has indeed shown that—in Chikoti's words—"Malawi can compete on the world stage."

As Malawi's largest festival, Lake of Stars grants those genres and media it acknowledges a privileged status in the art world. But Lake of Stars is not

predominantly a poetry festival, and getting poetry into Lake of Stars at all was a struggle. In 2012, Q. Malewezi worked with event organizers to get poetry integrated into the festival's main program, and the plan was a huge success: closing his performance at the 2013 Lake of Stars Festival, Malewezi made his exit by declaring, "Finally, poetry is on the main stage—poetry wins!" Videos from this first event testify to the audience's eagerness to hear the poets speak. In this context, Malewezi's excitement that "poetry has made it!" to the festival's mainstage in 2013 takes on deeper valences. It reminds us that poetry has a rightful place in the Malawian art scene, both in its current form and in forms that evoke longer performance traditions. It suggests that the poetry could itself be a lure for international tourists. And it argues that Malawian performance poetry can compete on the world stage. The poets themselves then become ambassadors, rendering national traditions legible to an audience who has come to see the best Malawi has to offer. Their words come to speak for, rather than to, the country they would address.

From the very first poetry performance at Lake of Stars, social media has been a key method for disseminating and discussing the performance's successes. The most widely viewed recordings were made on audience members' cell phones and posted to YouTube. In these recordings, unlike Poetry Africa's, audience voices share the stage with the poet's, even though the audience remains largely invisible. In 2012, cell phone

cameras were not primarily designed for video recording, and so the video and audio quality are both compromised. In some ways, ironically, this creates a more authentic representation of the atmosphere at these events. The sound is flattened: noises from the audience and those from the speaker come from everywhere and nowhere at once. The visuals are fuzzy, because of the dim lighting of the night performance. But the performer stands in stark relief, the camera focused solely on him. The audience makes up his atmosphere, but he is the object upon which the experience centers. Together, they dramatize the encounter between local and global imagined in cosmopolitan discourse.

As poetry became a baked-in part of each subsequent year's festival, the performances expanded to include Malewezi's core performance collective. Poets he collaborated with through his Project Project Living Room Poetry Club featured in the festival with him, and many brought their connections as well. As the event grew, social gatekeeping proved untenable. The successful performances of established poets in 2013 and 2015 gave way, in 2016, to a performance set that included emerging poets. Prior to the event, Malewezi put out a call on Facebook asking his fans which poets inspired them. in turning over the curation to the fans in the first place, Malewezi implicitly recognized the audience-driven market created in social media. The list they produced was varied, and Malewezi vetted the poets in turn by asking them to submit

recordings of their own pieces. He worked with those he chose, including Phindu

Banda, for a year before bringing them to the festival in 2016. These poets were mostly

younger, less established, and had not necessarily published their own work. Yet their

names were now entwined with the best Malawi had to offer. By bringing them on

stage with him and introducing them to a wider audience, Malewezi suggested that the

best Malawi has to offer are not necessarily those at the current height of their careers,

but those who the potential to grow.

In 2016, poetry was moved from its post-dinner, pre-music timeslot at previous

festivals to a morning slot far from the main camping grounds, attracting a smaller

audience than usual.[10] Relatively few of the festival's hundreds of visitors were awake

at this hour, and those who were preferred bathing in Lake Malawi over standing by

the stage in the day's heat. Nonetheless, nearly five dozen people, spread across fifty

square meters, stood to watch the poets speak. For this sparse audience, Malewezi

opened the event with his most famous poem, the one they wanted to hear: "People,"

the titular track of his most recent poetry album.[11] But this first poem got only a few

responses: the audience, largely primed to hear music, had not yet learned when and

how to insert their voices.

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[10] Beginning in 2016, Lake of Stars consolidated its non-musical offerings into a "culture and ideas" stage (Macpherson interview). Although this shift centralized a shared interest, it also constrained the schedule for poetry.

[11] For a reading of "People," see chapter 3 of this dissertation.

As the event proceeded, though, things changed. More people arrived—some of them friends, some passers-by struck by the performances. The poets themselves began to cheer on their friends. Audience members learned from this behavior and interjected their voices into the poems. Phindu Banda was the morning's third performer, and when she stepped up to give her first poem, the audience was ready to hear it and to become part of its message. Her poem began quietly, and the audience remained quietly receptive as they learned her rhythms:

> This is a nothing poem
> Written by
> A nothing poet
> For a nothing nation with nothing to show the next generation

As she moved deeper into the poem, her volume picked up and her tempo rose, and audience members began to lend their voices to hers like back-up vocals. She continued:

> These / are nothing letters
> Molded into nothing words

And the audience joined in, moved by her words and surprised into vocalizations:

| **PB:** | **Audience:** |
|---|---|
| Joined together to form | |
| Nothing sentences to highlight your nothing prison sentences | *Ooh* |
| Those right there? | |
| Are nothing people | *(cheers)* |
| Banished to a nothing village | |
| Right next to your good-for-nothing city with | |

Nothing fancy like water or electricity                                    *Aww*

As she performed, Phindu Banda remained still, alone on stage. She stood in a straight

line, hands centered in front of her, grasping the microphone. Her long hair, youthful

face, and brightly floral knee-length dress all stood out against the intensity of her

performance and the cynicism of her subject. Yet the strength of the performance

brought the audience into it, and as she elevated her voice, the audience joined her.

They followed the poet's cues, successfully learning how to behave from her, from the

message of her poem, and from the behavior of insiders. This socialization-in-miniature

is enabled through the conjunction of the poem's form and the festival's atmosphere.

Audiences can recognize a slam poem when they hear one, even if they're not prepared

for it in advance. And the arts festival invites audiences to interact with the art itself—

whether by participating in a fashion show, purchasing paintings, or shouting along to

music.

The arts festival thus becomes a training ground for poetry reception even as it

transforms individual poems and poets into symbols of poetic and national community.

Phindu Banda's poems—which were among the most successful at the festival, with the

longest applause and the most vocal audience responses—were about transforming a

dying society and ending gender-based violence. Both of these topics are, at the time of

writing, major themes in Malawian public discourse. Her presence as a young poet

made her a symbol of the future—a major theme for Lake of Stars itself. But her

audience was, in the majority, not Malawian. In the context of a festival established to

"raise money for a developing economy, help promote Malawi as a tourist destination

and expose Malawian artists to an international audience," Phindu Banda's

performance became wrapped up with her Malawianness and with the country's

international status—a concern the audience of Malawian elites and international

travelers demanded she address.

In the context of the contemporary arts festival, poetry's cultural capacity has

been transformed into a representative capacity, imagining a form of nativism that

Sarah Nuttall has described as "about the reclaiming of an essential self superseded by

an intrusive other […] Yet it is a form of agency which does not in the end overcome or

supersede the victimization of which it overwhelmingly speaks. Nativism relies on the

possibility of recognizing an essential self, while elevating the Other in particular ways"

(395). Removed from its immediate address and faced with the judgement of a

cosmopolitan Other, performance poetry at international arts festivals instead reifies its

message for a cosmopolitan audience. It must defend its place in a "world republic of

letters" and yet perform a "local" authenticity unique to the poet. This internationalist

attention to poetry-as-cultural-representative reflects a broader shift in cultural

consumption in the so-called global age, one which infects all forms of arts. Writing of

film festival publics, Cindy Wong notes,

> Over the years, the definition of 'international' has expanded and most film
> festivals actively solicit films from all corners of the world to the rapt attention of
> critics, cinephiles, and scholars. One can then argue that film festivals, at a very
> minimal level, have normalized the inclusion of films from all over the world as
> one of their practices. At the same time, in many Western A-list festivals, these
> favorites, 'negotiated' amid considerations of novelty, localized productions, and
> competition among festivals, have gained greater exposure and resonance with
> global political and economic transformations. (89)

Brought to a regional center, asked to perform for a global audience, the poet is

transformed into a "novelty," a "localized production," and her poem is reduced to

what Sitas calls "communication trapped in print" (150). Arts festivals thus reveal the

paradox of cosmopolitanism, which requires a sense of the local to express itself as

other-than-local: a contradiction which inscribes some identities—particularly those of

vulnerable groups like refugees—as never-yet universal.

THE POET AS AMBASSADOR: NEGOTIATING AUDIENCE DEMANDS

Simply appearing in public can constitute a risk for some poets, especially

because of poetry's cultural and political weight. Traveling, moreover, heightens a

poet's vulnerability, and inevitably changes the impact of the poem. The grounded

space of audience-poet interaction carries as much meaning as the poem itself, but the

spatial relations of poet and audience are never fully equal. For a poet writing across

nation-spaces, an outsider to the audience, the location of a poem's reception is especially important to its meaning. The speaker must herself represent the space between two places, a guest in the space of her performance and at risk in the place of home.

These risks are heightened in prominent festivals like Poetry Africa. Performing at Poetry Africa in 2014, Zimbabwean poet Wadzanai Chirui, who performs under the name Black Pearl, enacted the migrant poet's experience, made to represent her own country across ambivalent borders. She had been visiting Durban with 14 other poets for two days when they asked her to speak to Zimbabwe's political situation. The poem she performed cedes to her demanders' desires only halfway, protecting herself and her position between countries throughout. Before beginning, she looks around, and asks: "What do you do with the footage that you take here?" Laughing away this strange moment of distance, of an anxiety her audience does not share, she notes that she had composed the poem only that week, while sick with the flu, and it is the flu that shapes the poem she reads, her own body becoming metaphor for her country. The poem starts simply, reminding the audience of her discomfort even as she projects her address far beyond them:

> A lot of people want me to say something about you, my Zimbabwe,
> And particularly you, my president.
> But I never got around to laying you down on my canvases
> Perhaps I have a debt to our culture of silence and adaptation.

> I do think about you and desperately want to tell our story,
> The story of the gallant sons and daughters of the resilient nation.

Black Pearl's speaking voice echoes across national boundaries, drawing in an absent audience—"you, my Zimbabwe"—while absenting the present audience by withdrawing from them physically. As she performs, Black Pearl looks down, speaking softly and drawing into her body, as though separating herself from her audience. Her physical posture and speaking style reproduce the anxieties of poetic address, speaking to Zimbabwe as she shares the space of literary production with her South African audience.

Her voice, and the body that carries it, bridges the space between her audience and her addressee: where Zimbabwe's story appears only in ventriloquized overwrought abstraction, the speaker's own bodily ailments are much more immediately audible. With a sigh, Black Pearl turns from her country back to her own voice to explain why she cannot write or speak of Zimbabwe on this South African stage:

> But today, I am too sick.
> You see, I am down with the flu.
> The doctor gave me cough syrup, antibiotics, and probiotics
> To clear out the disease
> But they haven't quite made me well, yet.
>
> I guess that's how medicine works.
> The syrup makes me drowsy
> The antibiotics give me thrush

> And the pro-antibiotics make the thrush go away
> But they have long-term effects.

As physical ailments take the place of national maladies, cultural abstractions are replaced with the tangible promise of medicine, which can "clear out the disease," erasing all traces of illness so that it might never have happened—even as her exhaustion and literal illness is performed for her audience and captured in a video now preserved on YouTube. Even the body does not heal so readily, and the seeming transparency of medicine—empirically tested and obviously effective—yields to the irony of its looping failures and inadequacies.

Black Pearl closes her poem with a direct appeal to the audience, reminding them of their position as critical interpreters—and of her own as vulnerable traveler. Calling attention to the poem's central metaphor, and to its primary existence, she closes:

> But eventually, I'll be okay.
> Only then will I write for them
> The story of my Zimbabwe –
> But perhaps I have already written it
> You just need to find it
> In this poem.

By positioning her critique in aesthetic terms, Black Pearl puts the responsibility of interpretation in the audience's hands, freeing the poet from potential rebuke: anyone who could see criticism in her poem must, themselves, be taking part in that criticism. But this poem's quiet performance, its occasional composition, and its displaced

address all signal its attempts to un-speak, to say without saying, the experiences of living and speaking across boundaries. By replacing the nation with the body and taking her country's woes into her own illness, Black Pearl brings critique onto herself, as well; by performing critique as aesthetic, she releases her own responsibility onto her audience. The poet's body thus figures literally and metaphorically as a container for and protector of the performance, enacting distance even when the speaker is co-present with her audience.

The performance of self, and of self-as-citizen, is particularly fraught for the Zimbabwean poet in South Africa, where—at the time of Black Pearl's performance in 2012—implicit state support for the autocratic government was accompanied by increasing Afriphobia among the South African public.[12] Writing of South African perceptions of Zimbabwe and Zimbabwean nationals, Anita Howarth argues that "state identities and foreign policy can be mutually constitutive or mutually destructive, that constructions of identity can underpin policy frameworks and that the operationalisation or application of these to particular situations can reconstitute state identities. Thus, there is a dialectical interaction between processes of identity construction and foreign-policy construction" (290). The performance and construction

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[12] For more on the rise of xenophobic violence and Afriphobia in South Africa in the twenty-first century, see Okem and Asuelime, "An insight into South Africa's xenophobia: impacting on Africa's integration," *Journal of African Union Studies,* 4(2): 2015.

of a poet's individual identity, then, must be understood as first part of the construction

of a state identity and second the negotiation of foreign policy. Black Pearl, as poet, has

been asked to perform her identity, and her citizenship, but it is the South African

audience and context that defines the performance and its reception—an implicit risk to

poet, audience, and nation alike.

In moving between countries, migrant poets speak beyond the boundaries of

national interest to develop a shared world of concern. Their performances refigure the

migrant poet as an exile and thus as part of a nation which extends beyond its own

borders, "compensating for disorienting loss by creating new worlds to rule" (Said 144).

The position of migration and alienation becomes, in Black Pearl's performance, an

opportunity for national self-construction, a chance to acknowledge the place of exiles

and of refugees within the nation—while risking rearticulating the very national

structures which have created its condition. In performance, the poet's bodily presence

and the possibility of audience interactions produce transnational spaces through which

the positions of migrant, of refugee, and of poet blur.

Black Pearl's initial anxieties, and her performative erasure of distance, point to a

problem unique to the contemporary poetry festival, and particular to the migrant poet

at that festival: representation within the lingering archives of social media. Pointing to

the festival's cameras, she articulates a real problem of agency for the performing poets:

What do *you* do with *your* footage of *my* performance? Sponsorship by foreign organizations, governmental bodies, and the festival itself transforms the poet's performance into a commodity, pressuring performers to present their "true" selves to the audience. While poems and songs can be given through a persona, poets are expected to present themselves as unique individuals, providing works and performances that make them vulnerable to the audience. They also become representatives of their particular cultural origins as points of reference in the discursive sea of digital publication.

Just as Poetry Africa's audiences asked Black Pearl to perform a poem about her Zimbabweanness for their own gratification, so is each poet asked to perform their world for an audience of outsiders. Their performances allow alienated audiences to imagine themselves in the poet's position and see, through her body, the experiences of another. Black Pearl's performance appears to be highly critical of expectations that force the poet perform her self for a voyeuristic audience. Yet for many poets, the opportunity to perform their experiences for an attentive audience represents an opportunity to be made whole through the recognition of their performative self. Tyler Hoffman explains that, in the case of young American slam poets at the turn of the century, performing an authentic identity was itself an act of resistance: "these poets wear their identities on their sleeves: they embody their resistance to the dominant

culture on stage and page and through the transmissions of new media, even as they

look to undercut, or at least complicate, the ideological effects typically associated with

those media and their spectacles" (229). The poets Hoffman describes find liberation in

the opportunity to perform their selves, in a context where their identities were rarely

represented in public and were frequently the object of scorn and resentment. Though

slam has fetishized the authentic performance of marginal identities (Johnson 2010), for

some poets in positions of oppression, the opportunity to perform their selves remains a

liberatory one. This is especially the case for refugee poets in Malawi, who remain

marginalized in national politics and largely invisible to the national public.

    As part of its efforts to support Malawian artists, Lake of Stars has partnered

since 2014 with the Dzeleka Refugee Camp to sponsor the annual arts festival, Tumaini

Festival.[13] Dzaleka is the only permanent refugee camp in Malawi, and is home to

nearly 30,000 refugees from across central and east Africa. These large numbers,

combined with a generally poor perception of refugees, has left Dzeleka an ongoing

political question in Malawi. The festival works, in a small way, to address these

questions. Its primary missions are to "empower" refugees who gain skills in

expression and entrepreneurship through their participation in the festival, and to

foster "cultural exchange" both within the camp and between refugees and the home

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[13] "Tumaini" means "our hope" in kiSwahili

population. These two goals seek to bridge divisions and to improve public perceptions of refugees. At Tumaini, then, authenticity may recover its potential to provide authority to the speaker, instead of having it imposed by cosmopolitan others.

These appeals are fraught with questions of judgement and authority, of authenticity and sufficiency, and of individual agency. Even if, as Lazarus asserts, "One is not born, but made cosmopolitan," certain subjects have more access to cosmopolitanism than others and, as Lazarus goes on to admit, "Cosmopolitan discourse is not always authoritative; still less is it always backed up by an army. But inasmuch as it appeals to experience, comparativism and worldly wisdom, the cosmopolitan judgement often looks suspiciously like an edict" (120). Unexpectedly, Tumaini as a festival seems to court this judgement, perhaps to then find connection within cosmopolitanism, and position their own agency as cosmopolitical subjects, and—in Paul Gilroy's terms—renew "the cosmopolitan mentalities nurtured by the tri-continental network of anti-colonial struggle" (292). In performing authenticity for a cosmopolitan audience, the artist-refugees appeal to an ideal cosmopolitan imaginary, which dissociates subjecthood from national belonging.

Tumaini Festival features refugee artists and storytellers, bringing their work to a Malawian and international audience. It was the first time the refugees themselves featured as simultaneously artist, audience, and organizer. In addition to tapping into

skills and work already happening at Dzeleka, Tumaini highlights poetry that has been developed in arts workshops and poetry classes sponsored by NGOs and run by many of the poets involved in Lake of Stars and other organizing efforts. This art is thus implicitly transnational. It blends the cultural norms and political experiences of elsewhere within the guidance of Malawian artists, for a broadly international audience. Where Lake of Stars primarily promotes Malawian art, Tumaini promotes non-Malawian artists producing art in Malawi. However, Tumaini invites its audiences to treat the space of performance as, also, a space of habituation: the context from which the poetry speaks and which it is then made to represent. Poets are expected to speak to, in some way or another, the experience of that space—even if that means an experience which does not exist beyond the time-space of the festival itself.

According to a video that founder Menes La Plume made to raise funds, "the festival was founded to foster pride for the refugees, by giving them a platform to showcase their talents. Also, I thought that it was very important to open the doors of Dzaleka Refugee Camp to the world, to the Malawian community and to the international community, so that people could travel and see what is going on there and change the negative perception people do have towards refugees." La Plume worked with local artists and arts facilitators, including Robert Chiwamba, Phindu Banda, and Jules Banda to bring workshops to artists within the camp and to spread the word

beyond the camp. La Plume himself also traveled to poetry events around the country, including the KwaHaraba Open Mic Nights and Lake of Stars itself, to promote the event and showcase the artists' talents. In this sense, Tumaini enabled an unusual level of direct contact between Malawians and the residents of the Dzeleka refugee camp.

In founding the Tumaini Festival, La Plume's goals were akin to those of Lake of Stars founder Will Jameson: to remind outsiders, who casually derided or ignored the arts' creators, that refugees are people capable of great and moving art—capable of opening up and creating worlds for an audience of outsiders. In moving between nation-spaces and communities, migrant poets speak across bounds and beyond the particular limitations of national interest to develop a shared world of concern. Poetic performances refigure the refugee as an exile and thus as part of a nation which extends beyond its own borders. Performing as a Zimbabwean for a South African audience, Black Pearl suggests that the position of the poet—whether migrant, refugee, or exile— must always be carefully negotiated relative to her audience. Performing their humanity for a Malawian and international audience, in turn, the poets and artists of Tumaini make a claim for their own legitimacy, and for legal recognition and freedoms.

The poet-refugee holds a unique position in contemporary discourse, transforming disindividuated masses of humanity unable to live in or return to their native spaces, into exiles who, as Edward Said argues, "compensate for disorienting

loss by creating a new world to rule" (144). In his "Reflections on Exile" (1993), Said

writes, "Our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological

ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person,

mass immigration" (137-8)—an era-defining characterization which has held true into

the twenty-first century. It is in the production and conquest of new worlds that the

migrant poet takes the romanticized place of the exile, making a mark on lands to which

she will never fully belong.  The refugee poet-as-exile produces a world bridging and

reimagining the space between her home- and host-states. Said's insistence on the

romanticization and spirituality of the exile grants them an agency and an individuality

denied to the refugee—attributes sought in the performance of poetry for international

audiences.

CONCLUSION: POETRY'S DIGITAL COSMPOLITANISMS

The poets at Tumaini share unique experiences with a rapt audience who, in an

ideal world, carry their message into a broader political sphere. The affective sharing

between audience and poet creates a collective event, a common experience which

carries forward into and inflects the audience's and poets' everyday experiences. The

poem's connection to everyday life remains an open question, but poetry's connection

to the other verbal arts, and to language's everyday uses, is not. As Jahan Ramazani

reminds us, "Poetry draws on and intensifies features of language in other oral and

written uses, from which it can never be conclusively separated" (3). Poetry's

connections to language in all its uses allow the form to reverberate from its point of

origin, to draw together performer and audience in a shared presentation of cultural

meaning. The promotional video for the event includes an interview with a festival

goer, who says, "When you mention the camp […] people expect it is a place where

people are just being kept, and there is no real life. [...] I didn't have much of an

awareness about what happens in Dzaleka. […] So being here, and seeing the sharing of

different cultures and music, it's very impressive." As one refugee interviewed for the

video tells the viewer: "They see that, actually, they [refugees] are people like anyone."

At Tumaini, artistic expression is imagined to confer cosmopolitan agency. Yet it is, at

the same time, a performance for outsiders, asserting the value of these non-state

subjects, who are identified in the video by their country of origin. Poetry and the arts

reinforce, rather than breaking down, the tie between artist and national identity.

In the poetry festival, poetry shines as spectacle, singular events set apart from

the mundane world. Poetry festivals, like media events, work upon their own contexts,

transforming a university audience into a raucous event or a wooden stage into a

collaborative dance experience. The spectacle of poetry in the digital age insists,

ironically, on poetry's connection to the everyday, even as the festival context pulls it

apart into the realm of the sacred. The poetry festival performs and makes real the

innate connections between the "digitally circulated texts, sounds, and images" and "the private spaces once thought to be poetry's preserve" which they now penetrate.

Poetry festivals are among the best publicized poetry events, clearly indexed in Google searches in a way that smaller regional events are not. Festivals bring together the most highly regarded and influential poets from across a region, or within a community. They confer prestige upon those poets, providing models for attendees. And they are large, drawing in a bigger crowd than local events. Yet they implicitly integrate the outside world in their production. In the face of digitization, poetry has become simultaneously extroverted and popular, blurring divides between cultural registers and de-centering the academy in the process of cultural curation. The digital cosmopolitanism of contemporary poetry, then, registers the changing shapes of poetic reception and of cultural diffusion—even in the case of the arch example of poetry reception, the poetry festival. For audiences, the live performance of poems primarily encountered through digital or printed mediation can be a powerfully orienting experience. The previous chapters have demonstrated the influence of social media on poetic community structure and aesthetic form. But what about the communities that already came together around poetry? What happens when the digital interfaces with the material? How does the body perform, and how is it read, in the traditional spaces

of art and poetry performance? What has happened to the audience of the poetry slam,

the protest chant, or the poetry reading, in the face of digital remediations?

In a digital world, all poets implicitly perform for a vast, unknown, unknowable,

and ultimately foreign, audience. Their poetry is always already on display for a

broader audience, often without their direct consent. In an era of social media

publication and digital cosmopolitanism, all work is simultaneously introverted and

extroverted. If a work is published to anyone, it risks being viewed by all. All poetry

thus becomes liminal, simultaneously looking inward while exposing itself to an

outside, potentially exoticizing, gaze. The performances at contemporary arts festivals

actively seek that outside gaze. Even as they highlight the best the country has to offer,

and the best it can attract, they do so as a performance for outsiders, a claim that,

indeed, Malawian, or Zimbabwean, or South African drama, or poetry, or music, is

plenty good enough. It offers individual artists a chance to spread their names and their

work, gaining acclaim through the attention international crowds and marketing bring.

The poetry, then, is part of a broader performance, a performance that brings together

poets' words, actions, body, and charisma into a coherent, legible brand. Reading poets'

performances at international arts festivals, then, requires that we consider

simultaneously their background, genre constraints, and audience interactions, all

within the frame of global, transmedia literary circulations. Together, these

considerations help us understand how the classic model of poetry dissemination—

reading, aloud, together—has been reinvented for the contemporary moment.

CONCLUSION.
### *On Canons and Continuity: Poetry's Imagined Futures*



*Advertisement for the Cape Town launch of Koleka Putuma's* Collective Amnesia, *which was hosted at the Grounding Sessions open mic evening and advertised on Facebook and Twitter. Image from Koleka Putuma, cocoputuma.wordpress.com.*

This project has illustrated the influence of digital media communication on poetic form and literary communities in Malawi, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. Poetry's networked capacities—its allusivity, its density, and its relative brevity—have made for a surprising match with digital media. Poetic production across platforms now

contends with the affordances of new communication technologies and the restrictions

of algorithmic curation. Online, poetic form has shifted to reflect digital norms,

emphasizing conversational rhythms, short lines suited to mobile circulation, and

urgent political messaging that borders on what Kimberly Andrews has called the

"viral esoteric," a degree of referentiality that renders original sources indecipherable.

Aesthetic communities are increasingly characterized by a cosmopolitanism that

prioritizes the voices of elite youth and reinforces Anglocentric presumptions. The first

chapter argued that poetry created a shared language of dissent for protest movements

that spanned live and digital actions; the second that individual platforms' relative

investments in multimodal communication and open publication structure different

standards of poetic connection across regionally specific networks; the third that these

standards are linked to the rise of slam poetry as a genre and the poetry slam as a venue

in southeastern Africa; and the fourth that contemporary arts festivals are capitalizing

on poetry's popularity to consript the poet into their own processes of

institutionalization. What remains unclear is what these shifts mean for poetry's future

as a digital, performance, and print form. Even as literary form and community

structure changes, literary institutions have maintained power through festivals, prizes,

and publication.  What is the future of poetry's institutions in the face of digital

publication and communication? How has the rise of digital poetry influenced the distribution of cultural power and contemporary canon formation?

POETRY IN THE NETWORKED LITERARY PUBLIC SPHERE

The popularity of poetry on social media has both broadened its audience and brought a new, populist form of gatekeeping to the fore—one that emphasizes virality as prior to institutionality.  In June 2018, *Forbes Africa* posted a list of "30 Under 30" top creatives to watch. In addition to supermodels and fashion designers, the list included three rappers, two songwriters, and two poets: Sudanese Safia Elhillo and South African Koleka Putuma. This was the first time the *Forbes Africa* list had included a poet, and its description of Putuma's work is especially telling.[1] The article reads:

> Putuma grabbed the world's attention with her poem *Water*, a thought-provoking piece of writing and challenging performance on issues of race and religion. She's a poet, director, [playwright] and author. Her bestselling book, *Collective Amnesia*, is powerful, intersectional text that tackles race, sexuality, class, politics, and poetry. […] *Collective Amnesia* has been prescribed at tertiary level and made part of the curriculum. […] Her work has traveled around the world, with her poetry winning prizes such as the 2014 National Poetry Slam Championship and the 2016 PEN South Africa Student Writing Prize.

Where singers are described in terms of their commercial success—as "Best Selling Artists" (Kwesta, ranked twenty-ninth) who are "currently running the world of

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[1] As far as I can tell, this was also the first time such a list had been specifically devoted to "Creative" workers; most focus on business leaders.

Africa[n] music" (Wizkid at seventeenth)—poets' success is measured in terms of their

institutionalization: prizes won, audiences attracted, and classroom affirmations.

What remains implicit here, though, is that while Elhillo first gained prominence

thanks to international prizes for print poetry, Putuma's *Water* "grabbed the world's

attention" through the platforms that staged her performances. The poem, which won

Putuma several slam championships, drew attention beyond poetry circles when she

performed it at TedX Stellenbsoch, a major platform specifically designed to launch

young voices. But that night, Putuma reported, the poem alienated the largely white

audience, who came up to her later to express their distress with the poem. Instead, the

poem gained fame on YouTube. It was remediated through a video-poem directed by

José Cardoso and published on YouTube by InZync Poetries, where it went viral, and

finally in Putuma's debut poetry collection *Collective Amnesia,* which sold thousands of

copies within  months of its release, nearly quadrupling average poetry sales figures.[2]

The project of *Collective Amnesia* and of "Water" is, in many ways, akin to that of

this study: to re-evaluate the social impact of shifting technological epistemes from an

African perspective, and thus to highlight under-recognized knowledge communities.

"Water" reimagines South African history through the sea, the ships it carries, the

bodies that gather around it,  and the knowledges that emerge from it. It insists on a

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[2] https://brittlepaper.com/2017/08/koleka-putuma-change-sell-african-books/

relationship between speaker and space that transforms communication into an assemblage of material objects, from "black tights and Shoprite plastic bags" to "history books that do not tell the truth." The communities that form around those things are, then, communities of knowledge, which must recreate meaning in response to shifting media technologies. Putuma's poetry underscores how preexisting power structures manipulate communication to create new meaning, even as marginalized communities work against those same structures.

In the video for "Water," Putuma sits on jagged rocks by the sea at the edge of the city and critiques stereotypes of Black South Africans. Much like the platform that launched its success, the poem juxtaposes the profane and the sacred to offer symbolic reworkings of everyday injustices. Replacing racialized readings with ritualistic rehearsals of history, Putuma sighs:

> I often hear this joke
> about Black people being scared of water
> or not being able to swim […][3]
> Every time our skin goes under,
> it's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains
> and the water, restless, wishes that it could spew all of the slaves
>     and ships onto shore,
> whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk.
> Their tears are what have turned the ocean salty,
> this is why our irises burn every time we go under.  […]
> We have come to be baptized here.

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[3] In the version of "Water" published in *Collective Amnesia,* the lines read: "And I often hear this joke / about Black people not being able to swim / or being scared of water."

The poem, which begins and ends at the water's edge, centers the sea as simultaneously

a reminder of colonial trauma and a space of spiritual renewal. The poem's structure

similarly rejects colonialist claims on the land. Throughout the video, Putuma builds an

iconography of space and coloniality that rejects literary merit as tied to a settler

Christian normativity: she walks through the aisles of the Slave Church Museum and

whispers, "For all we know, / the disciples could have been queer," playing on visions

of a Black Jesus to reject the colonialist heteropatriarchy. Later, she stands amidst

passing crowds at the Company's Garden and declares, "Another one who looks like

me was murdered today by your kind. May that be the conversation at the table."[4] The

words remind us of the systematic violence against Black people in South Africa.

Putuma's direct gaze renders this suffering personal and challenges the digital viewers

to feel themselves complicit in that violence.

The poem draws on stereotypes of Black South Africa, on African cosmologies,

and on Biblical references and histories of colonization to criticize the city's often

unspoken legacies of colonialism and racism. If the language in "Water" ties together

contemporary stereotype and colonial history through Biblical references, its

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[4] The Company's Garden is a park in the center of Cape Town that was founded by European settlers in the 1650s. Today it is unusual in Cape Town for its concentration of colonial- and apartheid-era monuments.

geographic iconography imagines an alternate relationship to space, one mediated not

purely by the Bible or colonialism but instead by the tension between the individual

and the collective, invoked in passing crowds, empty pews, and a lonely beach. The

video's spatial references—the Atlantic Ocean in which slaves are buried, the church in

which they worshipped, and the gardens that beautify the city's brutal past—suggest a

broader collectivity further evoked through layered audio and ghostly visuals.

As the range of references in Putuma's work makes clear, poetry by and for

African youth—exceptional and ordinary, transcendent and everyday, mediated and

direct—operates across cultural frameworks largely ignored by Western literary

studies. To reduce poetry to its publication platform, to the audiences that form around

it, or even to the poet who produced it, neglects the broader cultural framework in

which it operates and through reference to which it makes its meanings. While those

frameworks may not always be local, they remain geographically specific. They interact

in a web which may never be fully global yet which drives attention,

institutionalization, and the preservation of certain knowledges over others. The

imbalance of digital power has been well-documented by scholars of postcolonial

digital humanities such as Roopika Risam and Safiya Noble.[5] By attending to the local

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[5] Of particular interest are Risam's *Digital New Worlds* (Northwestern University Press, 2019), in which she critiques the biases of digital humanities scholars in the Global North and advocates for postcolonial digital humanities, and Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (New York University Press, 2018), which examines how Google's search algorithms replicate oppressive social structures in the United States.

trajectories of such media shifts, though, we may begin to untangle the local production

of knowledge from its global circulations.

Many of these paradigms, though, have shifted radically in response to digital

media, where quantifiable metrics of popularity precede individual artists and

institutional recognition as literary gatekeeper. *Water*'s multiple introductions—

performed at TEDxStellenbosch and published on YouTube—offered conflicting paths

for Putuma's canonization: one through the institution of a university audience and the

other through the popularity of a digital audience. These contemporary cultural

institutions define and confer literary merit in different ways: Putuma's digital success

constituted a reaction against traditional literary institutions. In each case, the process of

canonization obscures its own institutional sources, whether the university syllabus or

the festival program.[6] As Barbara Hernstein-Smith has argued, "the value of a literary

work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit

evaluation that are frequently invoked as 'reflecting' its value and therefore as being

evidence of it. In other words, what are commonly taken to be *signs* of literary value are,

in effect, its *springs*" (52, emphasis original)—in other words, while initial recognition

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[6] John Guillory (1993) argues that the classroom, and specifically the literature syllabus, is the key site for the production and dissemination of the canon; to this I would add that the syllabus is itself reflective of a broader network of literary institutions.

may be somewhat arbitrary, it drives further recognition; or, nothing predicts virality so well as prior virality.

Ironically, the rise of populist gatekeeping strategies means failure in traditional settings can springboard success in popular ones. As I argued in the previous chapter, the relationship between popularity and canonization is cyclical, but uneven. As John Guillory points out, "canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission, in relation to other works in a collocation of works—the syllabus in its institutional locus, the school" (55). However, the rise of digital publication has decentered the school in the production of cultural value, as figures like Beyoncé become increasingly important cultural touchstones themselves. In the networked literary public sphere, popularity drives canonization: while Putuma's poem was rejected in its initial university performance, the scandal of that event brought it attention on YouTube, ultimately positioning it to enter university syllabuses across South Africa and academic texts like this one.

When uHanga launched *Collective Amnesia,* the publisher built on Putuma's digital popularity, promoting the book through social media posts like the one that opens this chapter. The book tour included readings at galleries, open mic nights, and poetry slams in addition to universities and bookstores. Putuma even crowdsourced additional stops: on 21 April 2016, she posted the preliminary tour dates on Facebook,

and wrote, "If you organise the venue and marketing, I will put your city on the route,"
ultimately adding two more stops to the original tour. Though she noted in a later blog
post, "I can't remember what possessed me to put out this call," the tour was a
remarkable success. Professor of English Uhuru Phalafala, who introduced Putuma's
reading at Stellenbosch, added the text to her course's syllabuses. Popular and formal
institutions entered into a dialectic relationship mediated by digital marketing: their
negotiations shift the balances of power in the establishment new forms of cultural
power through their interactions.[7] The literary blog Brittle Paper called the publicity
campaign "a lesson in innovation" which "could change how we sell African books."
Poetry collections—including *Collective Amnesia*—are best sellers for the first time in a
century. Poetry now enters the literary marketplace through live performance and
digital circulation, marking a dramatic change in how canons form.

This project tracked a shift from elite to populist gatekeeping, a shift which
engenders diverse networks of canon formation, reflecting the turn from  print to
digitally mediated forms of literary consumption. In the networked public sphere,
digital success comes prior to canonization, a shift away from the processes of
publication and marketing that typified processes of institutionalization in the

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[7] Putuma has posted a full account of the publicity strategies and timeline to her blog
(www.cocoputuma.com) in a post titled "You Owe Your Dreams Your Courage." It is currently available
at , and reposted by Brittle Paper at https://brittlepaper.com/2017/08/koleka-putuma-change-sell-african-books/.

twentieth century. As Sarah Brouillette (2007), Ariel Bookman (2016), and Nathan Suhr-

Sytsma (2018) have shown, the institutionalization of certain aesthetic norms have

sustained the rise of postcolonial literature—whether through university writers groups

and literary festivals such as Suhr-Sytsma traces or the more direct marketing schemes

of the multinational publishing industries Brouillette follows. More recently, the rise of

literary prizes and attendant workshops such as the Caine Prize for African Writing and

the Commonwealth Short Story Prize have created a Northern market for writers from

the Global South and subsequently promoted a self-critical aesthetic that, as Brouillette

argues, engenders a self-conscious relationship between the writer and her position in

the market.

If the spread of poetry on social media has supported the formation of new

regional communities, those communities have in turn sponsored new poetic forms.

*Viral Verses* demonstrated that those forms carry their own set of cultural allusions,

spanning history and geography, to respond to changing social norms and represent the

desires that drive further change—much as Putuma's poetry does. The rise of social

media platforms over the past decade, their seeming ubiquity across places and

generations, and their influence on a range of communication strategies has obscured

but not diminished the role of either distance or difference in assigning value. Poetry

today remains tied to persistent ideas about the nation, about local identities, and about

individual authenticity. Poetry performances at international festivals have become a means through which poets—whose careers are made through mediated publication, whether in print, broadcast, or social media—mark their individual identities, renewing a connection between identity and voice that social media appears to erase. However, it also exposes poets to the essentializing gaze of an international audience drawn together by social media, which has transformed not only poetic forms and aesthetic networks but also the norms that outsiders bring to art. The grounded space of audience-poet interaction carries as much meaning as the poem itself, but the spatial relations of poet and audience are never fully equal.

Indeed, as Brouillette argues, the migrant writer of postcoloniality is directly caught up in her authority as a representative of an imagined postcolonial nation. This is especially true for the poet. Poetry has long been the medium of nationhood. Its allusions delineate shared cultural frameworks, the unchanging character against which national history unfolds in empty homogeneous time. (Indeed, even this study—which strives for transnational comparisons—invariably defined poets by their national affiliations.) Online, poetry recontextualizes the relationship between art and audience, or text and context, flattening the divide between the two and addressing an increasingly populist public sphere. The turn from print to digital connectivity transforms the community connected through media by emphasizing time over space.

It reimagines community as deterritorial, connected principally by shared cultural and allusive frameworks. Digital networks construct a nation defined by the expansion of empty homogeneous time. In this shifting media terrain, poetry—allusive, dialogic, and networked—offers a rhetoric by which diverse, transnational communities identify themselves and one another.

## DIGITAL INSTITUTIONS AND NEW MEDIA CANONS

. The rise of social media poetics offers new modes for poetic assessment and success—and with them new possibilities for a more local and popular poetic canon. The transformation of cultural power by changing media landscapes is of particular consequence for poetry, which has long been a staple of the literature classroom, where its value is rehearsed at podiums and in examinations—and where it is often derided by youth who, as Denise Newfield and Rafael d'Abdon have found, consider it "too difficult, elitist, or remote from the concerns of everyday life" (2015, 511). However, as they argue further, "if poetry were reconceputalised as a multimodal genre, it could play a constructive role in the motivation and self-esteem of learners struggling to acquire competence in English" (2015, 211). And, indeed, this seems to have happened. As poetry moves from the literature syllabus onto Instagram pages and YouTube feeds, its references have shifted, embracing a populist discourse in conversation with everyday life.

Poetry like Putuma's flourishes online by building connections between the poet and a broader digital public. Such poetry embraces a popularly local rather than academically globalizing (implicitly Western) frame of reference; by changing its frame of reference, popular poetry addresses a new audience. As Ramazani writes:

> Poems come into being partly by echoing, playing on, reshaping, refining, heightening, deforming, inverting, combating, hybridizing, and compressing exptrapoetic forms of language. […] a poem faces both inward and outward: it enriches itself in its play on euphonies and dissonances within itself and across an array of earlier poems, and it fests on, digests, and metabolizes linguistic forms of other kinds. (6-7)

Poetry's connection to other forms—to news and prayer for Ramazani, or to chants and hashtags for this study—bind rhetorical communities. But what happens when tastes change rapidly and dramatically? What happens when the canon is determined by popular vote, rendering the always-great expanse of literary production suddenly visible? In response to new media publication, new institutions, literary communities, and poetic forms are rapidly transforming the sphere of referentiality, and with it, the canon of African poetry. The rise of instapoetry, for instance, encourages renewed attention to the aesthetic and material forms of poetry—not as a metatext but as themselves textual. These platforms emphasize the author function in all forms, often inscribing an image of the author on each post, revealing how identity play and community reform can reshape poetic production.

The rise of social media publication has engendered a rise in "celebrity" literary brands like Chimamanda Adichie's and even Koleka Putuma's, which are often tied to TEDx talks and thinkpieces published on Facebook. The journey of Putuma's *Collective Amnesia,* and her feature in the *Forbes Africa* "30 Under 30 Creatives" article, highlight how poetic canons are formed today: in response to shifting media norms, to the rise of multimodal poetries, and to the popularity of new media poetry. The role of aesthetic networks is increasingly prominent in the poetry itself. The networks through which Putuma's work circulate are apparent throughout *Collective Amnesia*: her acknowledgements thank dozens of South African womxn poets along with "the InZync team," "Word and Sound Live Literature Company," and "Lingua Franca."[8] The poems themselves engage deeply with the question of mediation and network, using footnotes, bullet points, and lists to demarcate their connection to and rejection of the poet's postcolonial schooling. Many are dialogic, invoking another's voice or suggesting interviews as Putuma questions the authority of certain epistemic systems and their influence on Black women's health and security.

The dialogues which structure the volume reflect the interactivity of digital verse: even though Putuma's work is published in print, it does not forget or fail to

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[8] Putuma uses the term "womxn" instead of "woman" throughout her work; I therefore do the same when discussing her work.

consider the digital networks that structure contemporary poetry. Her poems reflect

shifting attitudes about how poetry moves through the world, as more "under 30s"

read poems on their screens, hear them in person, and configure their lives around the

short, allusive, ambiguous texts that typify digital communication. The poem "Online,"

for instance, details the unspoken rules of digital discourse:

> Do not share a meme of your panic attack on social media
> Your 3456 friends do not know of the epilepsy that came before […]
> Do not post a selfie of your self-mutilation.
> God forbid your status reveals that you are lost or breaking.
> No one will comment on how raw or close to healing your tumour is.

This poem betrays the speakers skepticism of the connections and art supported on

social media. The "3456 friends" that make up the subject's social network cannot

separate the outside from the inside. They read their own lives in her posts, and the

speaker online becomes identical with the work that she creates and the viewer she

addresses. The unshared posts become themselves an absence which structures online

life and self-presentation—"no one will comment" on concerns which remain

unspoken, dividing digital self-presentation from lived self-conception.

Putuma's work establishes a South African poetic lineage that confronts colonial

and patriarchal social structures in the context of new media technologies. Sometimes

that work is imagined as solitary, as in "Online"; at other times it enacts a conversation

with colleagues; in each case, it is informed by a longer history of poetic production.

The poem "Lifeline"—responding to "Online"'s threats of digital self-mutilation and emotional tumors—opens with a three-page list of Black womxn thinkers, from Kimberlé Crenshaw and Audre Lorde to Buhlebezwe Siwani and Malika Ndlovu. Putuma acknowledges:

> you will say that this is not a poem
> and I will say that you are right:
> it is not.
>
> it is a lifeline.
>
> every name is a gospel shut up in my bones.
> every name
> chants
> *Black girl –*
> *live!*
> *live!*
> *live!*

The list of names invokes the speaker's personal deities, the artistic ancestors who inspire and inform her work, the literary canon into which a South African performance poet may write. Unlike the gods, these women can speak for themselves, and have published prolifically. Yet through Putuma's voice, their words emerge anew. The un-poem is then an invocation, externalizing the embodied sensation of knowledge and lineage. It is conversation, prayer, list, and chant, all at once, and as such, it performs poetry's density and connectivity, creating a network from within its own novel framework.

Though staged through and prioritizing a single voice, contemporary poetry acts through a performative lens which situates the speaker and reader alike within a networked public sphere. This is not to suggest that print or digital poetics is identical with performance and theater-making but rather that the "real-time" potential of digital publication shifts print norms towards a networked paradigm. The shift in poetry's reception thus transforms its institutionalization, driving readership through Tweets that appear prior to textbooks. Social media publication, much like an anthology, embeds individual poems in longer conversations; unlike an anthology, it encourages poems to jump between conversations, building connections both expected and surprising. Poetry's networked form highlights and heightens its dialogic character. The dialogues of contemporary poetry invoke the interactions of historical memory and cultural nuance.

AT THE LIMITS OF CANON REFORM

Putuma's poetry offers a critical commentary on canon formation. Many of her poems quote news stories, prayers, and sayings ("*Before dark* meant *home time*") to critique their ideologies, thus naming and then replacing cultural touchstones in the South African canon. In its place, she offers a new canon, one not taught in school but embraced through the body: the poem "Teaching," for instance, redefines "*archiving* (v.): a FUCK YOU to the canon". The tension Putuma identifies between the canon—

marked by judgement and selection—and the archive—marked by expanse and

accumulation—reflects her investment in expanding cultural power, identifying sources

of knowledge that escaped canonization. It also offers a new entry point into canons: by

rejecting them.The networked paradigm has transformed the formation of canons in

contemporary poetry. *Water* was taught in college classrooms prior to its publication in

a print collection, emerging as an already-remediated and revised version of itself.

Canonization now responds to entextualization: the remediation of familiar texts

enables us to reimagine the relationship between writer and reader.

This is not to suggest, however, that traditional forms of canon-formation have

altogether disappeared. The underlying fiscal structures that support literary

institutions have not disappeared; nor has the global market in which postcolonial

poetry is situated. Although this project largely focused on lesser-known writers, I

deliberately framed it with discussions of two of the most prominent Anglophone

African poets, and it is perhaps unsurprising that those poets came from the United

Kingdom and South Africa, two relatively wealthy nations. Culture still follows the

market—even more so as internet access increasingly defines cultural access. Access to

the capital of the Global North, including both literary prizes like the Commonwealth

and MFA programs, have spurred the careers of Afropolitan writers including

Chimamanda Adichie, Teju Cole, and Wayétu Moore. Regional economic hubs can

serve similar roles: a number of the Malawian and Zimbabwean poets I work with have studied, worked, or lived in South Africa; the reverse was rarely true.

Even as we note the extent to which digital media have transformed poetic circulations and community formation, then, it is also worth acknowledging the extent to which they reinforce and reproduce longer-term hierarchies and political structures, for instance by favoring poets that speak in the languages of the Global North. These forces can feel inescapable: I aimed in this study, for instance, to highlight lesser-known poets, but invariably prioritized writers whose work was most accessible to me as a scholar from the United States. In writing about, and teaching, some poets and not others, my own work will contribute to the canonization of algorithmic aesthetics, by linking certain names to key words which will connect them in Google search results, which prioritize names that appear in more places. And, once a poem has gone viral, or begun to appear on many sites at once, other poets seeking fame—or simply inspired by it—will be more likely to reproduce elements of its theme or form. The seeming democracy of the digital thus obscures the extent to which largely opaque systems like YouTube's and Google's algorithms structure reception.

But the power to advertise particular artists remains with those institutions that maintain both cultural and material capital. The classic institutions of literary access—such as publishing houses, radio shows, and arts festivals—retain primacy in the

hypothetically open digital realm precisely because of their market power and brand

recognition. At the time of writing, the two largest publicly available digital archives of

contemporary African performance poetry are Poetry Africa's YouTube channel and the

independent site Badilisha Poetry X-Change. Both are based in South Africa, which has

become the region's economic and cultural hub over the past twenty years. Both are

founded on principles defined by YouTube's platforms, and both rely on outside sites to

host their corpuses, making them vulnerable to corporate shift. Such sites are shaping

the norms of poetry today, integrating text, video, and sound recordings, and inviting

direct audience feedback in forms immediately familiar to social media users.

Moreover, these sites are largely based on principles from the Global North, which, as

Roopika Risam (2019) points out, risk reproducing colonial epistemologies if we fail to

recognize alternative aesthetic structures from the Global South.

The imbalance of representation and recognition online is especially important

because most audiences of performance poetry in southeastern Africa remain offline,

without recourse to digital commentary or responsiveness and yet affected by it: as of

January 2019, only 38% of Malawians had cell phones; 40.2% of Zimbabweans had

regular internet access; and 28% of South Africans regularly used social media. Yet

these minority populations, largely occupying privileged urban positions, drive

regional literary production through social media's network effects. Digital poetry

publication is thus a double-edged sword: it opens up a wider, broadly regional or

diasporic audience to more artists, and yet changes the art that is widely available and

placing it at the mercy of largely unknowable corporations like Facebook and Google.

Nonetheless, it represents a sea-change in the publication and circulation of African

literary and cultural productions, supporting South-South channels of distribution and

disrupting commonplace ideas about the role of poetry in everyday life. The poetic

voice, so long a figure for poetry's artistry, blends with the voice of the audience online,

to offer alternative models of poetic address, audience formation, and collective activity.

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