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7 April 2016

Ceaselessly Calling into Question All Origins:
The Death and Life of the Author in South African Oral Poetics

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in English
2016

Abstract

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This Master's thesis demonstrates an approach by which the theory of Barthes' "The Death of the Author" sheds light on notions of oral authorship and allows for the genre's placement within mainstream textual inquiry. Though both written and oral modes of authorship function quite similarly, the physical presence of the author in oral texts alters the author-audience relationship from the one-sided, lifeless conception of Barthes' to a more interactive, hermeneutic interchange. Chapter 1 focuses on the theme of authorial positioning through the conceptions of the "humanized" and "individualized" authors, of which Barthes' authors are typically the latter while oral authors are often the former. Chapter 2 concerns textual origins through historical trajectory as well as the textual recipient's role in propagating such texts. Chapter 3 discusses multi-dimensionality in regard to the role of contemporary South African poetics within this historical, and global, trajectory. Chapter 4 probes various disseminative modes, such as live performance, YouTube, and radio in relation to audience receptivity. Poets examined include: Lesego Rampolokeng, Ingoapele Madingoane, and Afurakan, among others.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Nathan E. Suhr-Sytsma, for his dedication throughout the research and writing phases of this project as well as for his advisement and guidance in my Directed Study on South African literature.

I would further like to thank Dr. Melissa J. Hackman and Dr. Catherine Nickerson for their assistance in the editing and revising of this thesis.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Suzanne and Jeffrey Barrow, for their unwavering support not only in this endeavor, but also throughout my academic career.

I could not have undertaken such an ambitious project without all of your support. Thank you for believing in me and seeing me through.

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Introduction

South African Oral Poetry, Roland Barthes, and the Theory of the Spoken Text

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and, having evoked it in oneself then by a means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling – this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them...

- Leo Tolstoy 1897, “What Is Art?”

Art, for Tolstoy, is the solidification of “a feeling one has experienced” into a form that can both be transmitted to others and can recreate such experience within them. It is not, as one may believe, rooted in the intentions of the author or even the desires of the recipient. It exists entirely within the moment of exchange between individuals. Of course “art” spans a multitude of mediums, ranging in materials, sensory impact, and presentation; such would include theater, dance, song, drawing, painting, and literature, amongst others. Regardless of the means, these modes of representation seek to achieve a representation of human reality (whether historical or imagined) that creates connections between interacting parties.

Oral poetry vividly exemplifies a pure experiential dissemination between individuals through its requisite proximity. It could be argued, thus, that this interchange is heightened in such an intimate mode of exchange. Troublingly, though, this form is often perceived as a sort of outlier in Western cultural contexts. Orality, used by any individual with vocal linguistic capabilities, is largely insignificant within such artistic understanding. Western societies are largely dominated by print culture; the ability to read and write are central principles within such societies and function as central modes

of informational dissemination. Because of this cultural indoctrination, many such individuals *favor* written texts aesthetically over their oral counterparts (Zumthor 4). Seeing as anyone reading this study is necessarily literate, it is important to understand writing's place within the textual corpus before beginning to understand how oral culture stakes its claim. In order to establish equity between the two forms, the term "text" will be used throughout this paper to refer to both inscribed and oral modes of poetics. In her book *The Anthropology of Texts*, Karin Barber claims the term refers to "the quality of being joined together and given recognizable existence as a form" (1-2). Texts, for Barber, are created when discourses "are made available for repetition or recreation in other contexts" thereby offering a platform for condensation and memorialization of such discourses (22). Due to the colonial history of South Africa, the term text serves to minimize cultural allegiance to either side of the equation – for Barber, the term "literature" is wrought with Western implications which serve to diminish the cultural validity of formerly colonized communities. By equalizing both groups' modes of textuality, the works can be examined more aptly against one another and framed more fairly as entities of different value, yet with neither being less important than the other. In this thesis, the term "text" will be preceded by either "oral" or "written" in order to minimize ambiguities.

First, we must understand the intricacies of written textual forms before we can understand oral texts' relation to such within this contextual realm. Because most African communities were primarily oral before widespread colonial incursions, there has been divergence over time in terms of the groups' perceptions toward written texts. The Xhosa, an indigenous community to be examined in more depth in Chapter 2, often

performed anti-colonial poems which purported the book and the rifle as metaphorical (and decidedly negative) symbols of the West. The rifle connoted “white destruction and dispossession” while the book signified witchcraft and war (Opland 293). Writing was so worrisome for the Xhosa due to its use in treaties and other agents of white dispossession. This fear was not without merit; eventually inscription led to the ultimate colonial intrusion: the creation of required identification passes for the indigenous communities dating back as early as 1797 (Union of South Africa 2). Interestingly, the Xhosa people used the term *incadwi* to refer to writing, though the word was originally used to refer to a poisonous bulb (Seddon 307). Alternatively, a Xhosa minister named Tiyo Soga (1829-71) affirms that paper functioned as “a beautiful vessel for preserving the stories, fables, legends, customs, anecdotes, and history of the tribes” (Seddon 308). The preservative measures of inscription are perhaps its greatest attribute; without such, much of history itself – even beyond literature – would have been lost. Contemporary South African poets have noted that print functions as an “important means to ensure the preservation, education, and dissemination of South African orature” (Seddon 308). Even in the exploration of South African orality for this paper, written copies of the poems served to elucidate the words and intricacies within the pieces. Additionally, because much research on South African oral poetry is recorded in books, print served as a more accessible form of media than recorded performances. Due to these facts, a scholar cannot deny the unparalleled impacts writing possesses for the dissemination of knowledge.

In its preservation of ideas and experiences, writing serves to supplement the human memory. In his article “Unlocking the Potential of the Spoken Word,” Douglas

W. Oard asserts that inscription provides “permanence, findability, and contextualization” (Oard 1787). This aid in memory arises from the fact that books are stable; they will always say the same thing they said before. For Walter J. Ong, this constancy of writing results in a perception of its greater truth-value, as demonstrated in his example of the lesser value courts place on witness testimony than on inscribed evidence (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 78). In his words, written text is “exactly repeatable” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 125). Because a book’s contents will never change, it is able to capture an idea or a history in a more finite manner than an orally disseminated memory may. At its core, writing aims to preserve thought in ways that oral texts could not have done. Of course written texts, as with texts of all sorts, are dependent upon the reader’s interpretation. Receiving audiences’ views and approaches will invariably change over time; therefore, while the book will always say the same thing, it may not always be interpreted as such. In essence, while the written text *aims* to preserve information, it may not always be entirely accurate or successful in this endeavor.

Similarly to modern arguments against the advent of computers, Plato argues that writing in fact destroyed memory; written texts replaced a need for humans to retain memories in their own consciousness (Ong, *The Book History Reader* 134-5). This argument is valid in the sense that contemporary literates assume a greater truth for that which is inscribed due to the stability of the written text; what is documented within a book is unchanging. It is due to this feature that governments have historically burnt, destroyed, and censored unpalatable texts; the book’s destruction is the only means of its silence. Again, elaborating on Ong’s metaphor of the courts, a witness’ written deposition will likely hold greater credence than his or her oral testimony in court. In fact, modern

consciousness is so “deeply conditioned by literacy and print” that such individuals actually “speak literately” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 55-6). The fact that written text and inscription have become such great influences within contemporary culture goes to show how our memories themselves have also developed alongside the crutch of literacy.

With this basic fortification of written textual theory, we can now move into the realm of oral texts. Ferdinand de Saussure, a French linguist, asserts “the primacy of oral speech, which underpins all verbal communications” and views “writing as a kind of complement to oral speech” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 5). While oral speech undoubtedly existed before any semblance of writing could even be conceived, it is also “primary” in the sense of its spontaneity. Writing is traditionally planned, delineated, and scrutinized before being disseminated to other people, while speech comes from within, carrying with it a greater sense of extemporaneity. As Paul Zumthor, author of *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, explains orality does not simply aim to explicate a thought but is “the desire to say what you mean as much as a desire to exist” (5). Speech asserts attention not only toward an idea, as does writing, but also toward the individual championing such thoughts.

The fact that dialogue comes directly from an individual is critically important in understanding the effects of its use. As noted above, speech comes from within and represents an instinctive mode of communication. Zumthor further explains, “verbalized sound goes from interior to interior” (8). The interiority of such communication heightens the degree of human interaction in the sense that each participant, whether the speaker or listener, forms some sense of a relationship with his or her counterpart. Verbalized sound carries not only ideas, as does writing, but vivid emotions that yield to a greater depth of

empathy between counterparts. For Zumthor, the mouth is not only an entrance into the body, but an exit from which meaningful sentiments are dispelled (Zumthor 8).

Because speech is “inseparable” from consciousness, these emotions can be considered viable representations of the speaker’s mental and emotional state (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 9). The act of speaking is, for Ong, “fully natural” and “well[s] up out of the unconscious” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 81). The bursting of sentiment from the depths of the unconscious positions speech as a mode of necessity. It is not that one necessarily speaks solely by desire, but by the imperative to make his or her internal needs and desires known. This expulsion of sentiment “always engages the body” in some sense, whether that be as small as simple hand gestures and facial inflections or as large as intense movements like dance (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 67). Because of this unification between word and body as an emotional “event,” sound, then, holds more power than “literate things” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 74, 33). This power seeks to not only engage its listener, but to unite whole audiences and create cohesive groups sharing like interests or experiences (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 73).

In terms of poetry, oral modes of text allow for the unification of cultural or ethnic groups through the shared memorialization of their history and experiences. Often, as will be expounded upon in Chapter 2, the oral poets of indigenous societies were considered to be historians, much as written poets have been viewed throughout literary time. By the 1970s during the height of the apartheid struggle, “oral performance presented the most effective way in which writers and poets could evade the censorship machine of the state” (Seddon 314). Not only did the speech of the poets bring together like-minded black South Africans, but also functioned to undermine political institutions.

Mbulelo Mzamane, a South African writer, claims that memories – held in their most pure form within the human consciousness – cannot be banned (Seddon 314). In this sense, poetry through voice functions as a textual representation of the speaker’s consciousness and memories of the past. Ong cites song as the “universal art” because of its primarily emotional facets, which supersede any linguistic or cultural knowledge (Zumthor xi). It is not through the words, per se, that the song develops meaning, but through its interplay and interpretation by the audience (Zumthor xi). This speaker-listener dialectic hearkens back to Tolstoy and will be substantiated through our impending exploration of Roland Barthes’ 1967 essay, “The Death of the Author.”

The audience functions as a critical component of speech, as well as oral texts more specifically. Ong helps to explain a text’s awareness of its audiences and contexts through the concepts of “primary” and “secondary” orality. Primary orality is that which is produced within entirely oral cultures (those which do not have awareness or access to literacy) and focuses entirely on sounds, occurrences, and events (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 31). Secondary orality develops a wider scope, turning “outward” and functioning within literate societies in order to form a “developed group sense” (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 134). The second of these concepts can be applied to contemporary forms of spoken word poetry, in that it conceptualizes the unifying nature of spoken word poetry beyond one’s immediate surroundings or elected group. While early forms of indigenous poetry were entirely bound within the cultural and social constructs of their own societies, more recent forms of oral poetry in South Africa propagates its messages through modes such as YouTube, radio, and social media. This broader scope allows for a more varied audience and promotes a greater degree of unity and togetherness. While

one form cannot be placed in a position of primacy over the other, “secondary” orality seems to demonstrate a facet of the evolutionary trend of orality within South Africa as the social systems changes from internally focused subgroups to an unavoidably external, Western-focused, and racially driven totality.

The essence of the poetry is not only embedded in the audience itself, but the entire audience-speaker-space relationship, which we can understand as the hermeneutic process between the poet and his recipients during a poetic transmission. The moment of the performance – the experience it puts forth – is the lifeblood of the poem. Harold Scheub explicates that the oral poem “necessitates... [the] lacing of time and space; it requires event and spontaneity and loses its identity when frozen in memory or writing” (491). It is just this – its vivacity – that makes the oral text so effective. It requires not only attendance but also attention paid by the audience – there is a degree of effort required. For Ong, “to understand what is going on [in oral poetry], you have to understand and be engaged by everything” in a way one cannot with written text (Zumthor xi). It is the entire context of the speech act that substantiates meaning and transmission. And while this speech event may be fleeting in the physical sense, there is “no way to erase a spoken word,” in the sense that the experience and emotions the performance stirs will find life and meaning within those who experienced it (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 103).

Approaching Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” through the lens of South African spoken word poetry substantiates a pivotal position toward a seminal understanding of authorship through the oral’s insistence on authorial vivacity. Barthes (1915-1980), a French scholar of literature, philosophy, linguistics, and semiotics, argues

for the critical rupturing between textual meaning and authorial experience. In essence, the “capitalist ideology” of current criticism has “attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author,” rather, his or her biographical history (Barthes 143). Barthes argues that it is not, in fact, the author, but is “language which speaks” (Barthes 143). He conceives of writing as reaching “that point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me’” (Barthes 143). In essence, the writer is simply a conduit through which language reaches its destination: the reader. Because the authorial role ends with the inscription of the text, the writing’s true vitality exists within its recipient, who is charged, in a sense, with the remembrance of the text. Barthes explains that the “total existence of writing” lies within the reader as “a single field [which holds] all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (148). It is only through the release of authorial importance that one can “give writing its future” and allow “the birth of the reader... at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 148).

In this sense, authorial and recipient importance seems mutually exclusive: either the author or the reader can function as the locus of vivacity within the text. Yet South African oral poetry (and likely oral poetry more broadly) functions to overturn these beliefs. This study aims to demonstrate how orality complicates and refigures written textual theory through what function as Barthes’ four main concerns: the author, the textual origin, multi-dimensionality, and the reader. The oral poetic author serves as a sort of textual anomaly within this Barthesian schema; while the author necessarily must be separated from the text, the oral speaker necessitates voice (and often physical presence) to transmit his or her work. This compulsory vivacity within oral textuality complicates the notion of the “dead” author; how can someone be “dead” to his audience

if he is standing right in front of it? This author-audience relationship “ceaselessly calls into question all origins” due to the continual passage of hermeneutic interpretation upon and between each participatory party (Barthes 146). One cannot fully maintain an “origin” or set of intentions due to the constant impact of the opposing party; the audience will invariably be affected by the author’s tone and demeanor, yet the author, physically present in this exchange unlike Barthes’ “dead” author, is also influenced by his or her audiences’ reaction to the performance.

The first chapter of this study aims to encapsulate the authorial complications between written and oral texts through these tensions of vivacity. Further, it substantiates that while Barthes’ claims toward the separation between authorial biography and text are certainly valid and, to an extent, necessary in oral poetics as well as written texts, it is not wholly plausible in this context as it is in Barthes’ books. The second chapter examines the origins of such oral poetics, building off of Bakhtinian notions of linguistics, and argues that Barthes’ conception of the impossibility of originality in text is relevant here, in orality, as well, due to the clear influence of social, political, and religious conceptions throughout historical eras of South African poetics. The third chapter, which focuses on multi-dimensionality, furthers the study of origins in Chapter 2 by demonstrating such historical as well as multi-cultural and global influences within contemporary oral poetry. Lastly, the fourth chapter seeks to delineate the relationship between the “reader,” or in oral textual form, the “recipient,” and the text itself. Because of the hermeneutics between speaker and recipient, these positional delineations are not finite, but rather fluid, unlike Barthes’ conception. Examining various modes of audience reception such as live performances, YouTube videos, and radio or podcast recordings, this section

reveals how intimate speaker-recipient connections (such as in live performances) serve to subvert the Barthesian notions of textual resonance as occurring solely within the reader. Mediated connections, as seen through YouTube, radio, and podcasts, begin to adopt modes of Barthesian “death” through their maintenance of more determinate authorial and recipient roles due to a lack of physical proximity. Ultimately, the study reveals that Barthes’ conception of the author’s “death” may inform our interpretations of oral poetics quite accurately; approaching the text without preconceptions based on authorial biography serve to heighten the recipient connection with and resonance of the text. Despite this, the innate vivacity of the author in oral dissemination intricately influences the text by creating a more fluid author-listener relationship.

One may ask why Barthes? And why South African oral poetry? Of course, such topics of inquiry are (seemingly) wholly opposite within the academic realm; the first is born in a more “traditional,” or perhaps Western – and therefore, more academically accepted – sense of literary theory while the latter is often rejected as a literary form at all. First, Barthes’ text mirrors a common tendency of the academy to confine textual inquiry solely to writing; oral texts are often viewed as influences of “popular culture” rather than part of the literary and textual corpus. This comparison serves to broaden the application of Barthes’ theories beyond a strictly written understanding, as well as begin to offer oral texts a more legitimate foothold within academic inquiry. Barthes specifically provides a noteworthy comparison to oral texts for his absolute assertion of “death;” oral poetry is so resonant chiefly due to the *traces of life* that comprise its essence. South African oral poetry, then, functions as a means of understanding orality through a culture which has prized such means of dissemination throughout its cultural

history. While many African nations demonstrate trends toward orality, as seen in the popularity of spoken texts throughout their histories, South Africa's populous nature and rising position within world politics and economies compared to other African nations serve to increase the accessibility of its works; South Africa is one of the more researched areas of the continent in academic studies, and the geographical limitation serves to focus this study without veering toward broad generalizations about entire regions. My hope for this inquiry is to demonstrate how seminal literary theoretical texts inform oral poetics and how scholars can begin to understand the correlations and disjunctions between written and oral modes of authorship and audience-hood.

Chapter 1: The Author

Figuring Barthes' Conception Within the Context of South African Orality

The author is a critical link in the literary chain of inquiry. Without this actor, the work itself (poetic or otherwise) could not and would not exist. As the locus of creation, this figure holds a large proportion of power in regard to the work's form, its motifs, and its ultimate context of reception. The author's role is tenuous, though, in that a large proportion of his work's relevance is derived through the piece's transmission to an audience of readers or listeners.

This chapter will seek to delineate both Barthes' conceptions of the author and the author's role in the literary process as well as the associations and disjunctions between the theory (which focuses on written texts) and its grafting upon the oral-textual context of South African spoken poetry. First, this chapter will explore the dichotomy between "individualized" and "humanized" authors and their roles within poetic reception, and will secondarily examine the effectuality of oral poetry through the lens of Barthes' textual "intransitivity." In whole, these points of inquiry lead us to discovering the oral speaker's complex positioning on the brink of both vivacity and authorial "death."

1.1 Locating and Expanding Barthes' Conception of "The Author"

Roland Barthes locates his understanding of authorship within "capitalist ideology" and its tendency to attach "the greatest importance to the 'person' of the author" (Barthes 143). The author, then, is the locus by which literary work is interpreted, or at least critiqued. He explains, "The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions"

(Barthes 143). Essentially, the work is understood through the lens of its writer. Barthes asserts that the reader views the narrative voice as “the voice of a single person, the *author* ‘confiding’ in us” (Barthes 143). This linkage, he believes, is toxic; it fails to understand the multiplicity of influences within a text as well as its multitudinous layers of meaning. The process of literature itself involves both writing and reading, where “the author is never more than the instance writing,” and at which point the onus of participation lies within the reader (Barthes 145). It is at this moment – that in which the book becomes a completed and independent entity – that the author effectually “dies.”

Barthes elaborates this conception through his opening example of Balzac’s *Sarrasine*, in which a man masquerading as a female seems to fully embody such being. Barthes questions, “Who is speaking thus?” pondering if it would be the man inside, Balzac’s “philosophy of Woman,” the author’s personal ideas on femininity, or a broader sense of “universal wisdom” (Barthes 142). The illustration serves to enlighten the conception of perhaps the concealment (or death) of the interior being in favor of a heightened sense of exteriority. What is seen – “This was woman herself” – seems to override the knowledge of what is within, functioning on a more relevant plane than the being of origin.

Barthes’ authors, then, seem to exist in a somewhat mysterious and distant embodiment. While they are critically dissected and “understood” by critics, they are placed on a pedestal away from the corpus of humanity – more specifically, their readership. They are concealed, to an extent, by their writing through the confusion Barthes uncovers in the narrative voice of *Sarrasine*. Who truly *is* speaking? Are

characters autonomous beings or are they influenced by and demonstrative of the authors themselves?

This framing, it seems, is in direct opposition to the placement of such author-figures in oral traditions. Barthes notes that in such cultures,

the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman, or relator whose ‘performance’ – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius.’ (Barthes 142)

In this explanation, oral texts are not authored, but transmitted and mediated. Barthes structures the speaker as a link within a disseminative chain, simply passing along ideas from a higher power and with no critical or creative agency of his or her own. Not authors with “genius,” these speakers are intermediaries that simply possess a talent with language.

The brief attention Barthes pays to oral literatures, and the disdain with which he appears to confront the genre, indicates a stark separation of and distinction between oral and written texts. What the subsequent subchapter seeks to explore is *why* these areas would be considered different through the lens of overlapping and opposing trends between the concept of the oral “author” and that of Barthes’ written “author.”

1.2 South African Poets’ Alignment with and Refutation of Barthes’ Conception

The oral author occupies a curious locus within literary production. While South African orators exist in a literary world largely off of the page (although this area of existence will be mapped further in Chapter 3), they still create an art form interiorly which is professed and disseminated outwards, much as do written authors.

This subchapter seeks to define the oral poet within Barthes' sense of authorship through the lens of two authorial traits: the authorial association and the intransitive relations with reality. By authorial association I mean the authorial role in relation to its audience – whether the audience feels closeness to or distance from their author – and argue that verbal authors subvert Barthes' sense of authorship through the cultivation of a more reciprocal author-recipient relationship. While this closeness fosters a sense of intimate understanding, the text still demands a sense of distancing from the author, thereby placing the speaker within the perplexing role of “dead man walking.” In the latter of the subtopics, I seek to explore the relationship of the narrative through reality, basing its line of inquiry off of the following assertion of Barthes:

As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (Barthes 142)

In my view, oral texts are simultaneously *not* writing, yet constitutively embody the essence of an intransitive relation with reality. Barthes' authorial death – as embodied through the clash between intransitive narration and writing – locates the oral speaker as an *author* through their engagement in such narrative, yet one that is concomitantly *not dead* through the maintenance of their own voice.

1.2.I Authorial Association

One of the central aspects of understanding the author is assessing their relationship to their audience: As whom are the authors trying to imagine themselves? And how does this shape or further the message they are disseminating? The author will always have a degree of presence within texts, despite Barthes' argument to end their influence at "the instance writing" (Barthes 145). These modes of influence can be categorized twofold, though such groupings are not mutually exclusive. Such classifications are (1) the author's sense of individualism, and (2) the author's sense of humanity. The former concept encapsulates the author's envisioned "persona" beyond their role simply as a member of the human race but as a glorified, revered public figure; the latter captures the author's shared emotions with the audience – the ability to connect with others on an experiential or physical level.

Barthes' attunement to the critical tendency to situate the author within the "capitalist ideology" gives way to an authorial "caricature," placing the individual strongly within the concept of authorial individualism. This characterization of the writer (or textual producer) serves to inform our understanding of their work: "Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice" (Barthes 143). The understanding of the work is through the author – or at least what can be gleaned of his existence; they are inextricably linked. The author is, for Barthes, the point from which works are understood and from which derives "a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 147). Essentially, this characterization or individualizing of the author may serve to hinder the whole of the text itself; instead of being a finite entity to be discovered and interpreted by

its audience, it becomes shaped by and situated within the realm of the author's own experiences and persona.

This individualized space is perpetuated by (and perhaps born within) Barthes' realm of "criticism." Not only does the presence of an authorial figure limit the text's meanings, but "Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author... beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic" (Barthes 147). Without such function, perhaps the author would not be revered within such an individualized mode and the text itself would not be grounded in such a biographical sense of understanding.

Suppose one could name a South African oral poet – the likelihood of his or her ability to expound upon the poet's personal life or struggles would be dubious. Beyond interviews, it can be extremely difficult to gauge much about these poets due to the overwhelming *lack* of criticism in this field. While there is a degree of scholarly interest in the earlier Xhosa *izibongo* poems, South African oral poetics within the last century – and even more so within this generation – are underrepresented (and, in essence, invisible) within academia.

Assuming Barthes' linkage between criticism and author-as-character, textually oral poets are unable to embody an "individualized" space due to this lack of critical attention. Understanding Barthes' trajectory as a chain – in which a writer informs critical readings, which thereby form the "text" itself and creates the "caricatured" author – oral poets are missing the central link of the critic. Without this "individualized" positioning, the oral author is ignored, perhaps viewed as Barthes' modern "scriptors" who are "born simultaneously with the text" (Barthes 145). In this sense, the oral authors' relevant

experiences or identifiers that could have further developed textual resonance as the author-as-character are void. Without this authorial caricature, the oral writer loses a sense of ownership and influence over their texts in the public eye in contrast to that which an “individualized” writer could maintain.

Nevertheless, this loss in “individualism” serves to enhance the poets’ sense of “humanity” and intimacy with their audiences. The notion of authorial humanity is opposed to the concept of “individualism,” though specific authors can certainly possess traits from both conceptions. The “human” author is not that which is glorified upon a pedestal such as Shakespeare or Chaucer, but one in which the audience senses an emotive connection. Though the author is still separated from the audience in a degree – one of which is speaking or writing while the others are listening or reading – he is able to foster a sense of familiarity and depth of understanding that a glorified author cannot. Instead of positioning the author as a distant, god-like figure, the “human” author seeks to foster closeness – an equilibrium – with his audience in which he functions on the same plane. While “individualized” authors do not necessarily seek this positioning, such glorification encourages a sense of distancing that un-critiqued authors do not (and cannot) maintain.

Aside from the basis of the “individualized” author in criticism, another facet that influences its development is the bias of academia (and society more broadly) toward print. Because print media is considered “literary” and “scholarly” to a higher degree than oral texts, spoken poets struggle to gain a foothold within this perception. The dichotomy between print and oral texts is critical for the “individualized” and “humanized” modes of perception. As a printed author, one is in essence invisible; hiding behind a page, the

audience has no indicators as to who is speaking to them aside from any textual clues on the sleeve of the book itself (and these are not always present). The printed author is further crafted into a glorified, one-dimensional being. Further, without this link between reader and author, the absorption of the text is a singular, isolated action. To make the act of reading a communal activity would require the intervention of oral speech, as seen in poetry readings or telling a bedtime story to a child. Walter J. Ong expounds on this conception: “Yet words are alone in a text. Moreover, in composing a text, in ‘writing’ something, the one producing the written utterance is also alone. Writing is a solipsistic operation” (Ong, *The Book History Reader* 143). The concept of solipsism, or the idea that one’s own existence is the only thing that is real, inherently separates the writer from his or her audience not only spatially, but also cognitively.

Oral text, on the other hand, occurs typically face-to-face or at least through a medium imbued with a sense of sound, such as a recording. The ability to gauge *who* is speaking is heightened, if not blatantly apparent. Quite quickly, one could tell the age, gender, and potentially, the cultural background (if the speaker has an accent, wears a specific type of dress, etc.) of the orator. Additionally, this heightened sense of personhood – wrought through the ability to locate and sketch the speaker *independently* of a critic – allows for the audience to develop a sense of intimacy with the speaker that is not possible through print alone.

Walter Benjamin captures this sense of humanity and corporeal proximity through his discussion of the “soul, eye, and hand” within his pivotal essay “The Storyteller” (Benjamin 108). These facets together “determine a practice” of storytelling that depends not only on the linguistic contributions of the story, but also the role of the sentient and

physical being. The hand functions to support “what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures” and the soul and eyes add further emotional depth to the speaker (Benjamin 108). It is precisely this “co-ordination of the soul, the eye, the hand” which “is that of the artisan” or the storyteller (Benjamin 108). This synthesis of being, consciousness, and corporeality allows for the deeper sentient relationship between an orator and his recipients than a written author can achieve. The role of the soul can, in the context of oral authorship, be seen as a means of forging an alliance between speaker and author as a foreground to discover commonalities; as the soul is opened and revealed in the poetic act, the audience is ushered into a sense of intimacy and mutual understanding with the speaker. Benjamin’s sense of the soul, eye, and hand is not limited to only that of the author, but expands to that of the recipient as well. In a discussion of how stories shed “light and shade” upon objects, he notes that such entities “get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self” (Benjamin 108). The recipient must allow the story to seek entrance into his being through these physical conduits and reflect personal meaning upon the tale through his own experiences. In essence, “The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself” (Benjamin 109). The eyes and the hands serve as vessels to transmit the essence of the soul more readily to an audience; such linkages can only be achieved through person-to-person contact.

Karin Barber’s discussion of indigenous ideas of identity and personhood offers an interesting permutation of such concepts. Citing social anthropologist Alfred Gell’s notion of “distributed personhood” as a mode of “personhood distributed in the milieu,

beyond the body boundary,” Barber offers a basis for understanding the idea of the “opened soul” of the oral poetic (Barber 104). She explains that, in such oral societies, “personhood can thus be seen as emergent and processual: persons are not given but made, often by a process of strategic and situational improvisation” (Barber 104). In this sense, oral authors are not “given” as would be the case through the critical identity formation of the “individualized author,” but “made” in the sense that the recipients play a role in the construction of the author by locating their own experiences and backgrounds within the speaker themselves. The “humanized” author, then, gains identity not through formalized biographies through which his or her works are assessed, but through the reception and “relatability” of the works. It is not in the author’s vices or shortcomings – the sardonically tragic aspects of their being – that the text is situated, but within his or her more common experiences.

More specifically for South African oral poetry, this disjunction between “individualized” and “humanized” authors may have deeper implications than simply written style. While not all “humanized” authors compose orally (though for our context, this is the subset – and majority – of the group that will be studied), it seems as though all “individualized” authors are inscribed, and, un-ironically, Western. The disjunction between the “West” and, essentially, “everybody else” functions to privilege Western writers at the expense of undervaluing non-Western authors. Because Western society is so entrenched in literacy, oral *texts* (because literary societies still prize orality through conversation and other less textualized modes) are relegated to the periphery, if they are even included within formal textual inquiry at all. Such a non-Western, (and in our case) African status seems to, perhaps, prohibit its authors from gaining a sense of glorified,

authorial power. Often, only the “human” is substantiated as a viable textual persona for the non-Western producer.

Western society’s ignorance of oral forms does not make such practices any less valuable to both textual art and the promulgation of human connectivity. Benjamin locates storytelling’s power within “the ability to exchange experiences” (Benjamin 83). Because the storyteller translates experience into text, he functions to foster a sense of connectivity that written texts, which for Benjamin are exemplified most strongly through the novel, cannot, due to the fact that “the novelist has isolated himself” (Benjamin 87). The writer “is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others,” thereby leaving him unable to act as a unifying storyteller, which “has counsel – not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage” (Benjamin 87, 108).

While “Storytelling” does not literally refer to oral poetry, but rather oral storytelling in general, correlations can be made between the two genres. In fact, in early South African orality, the indigenous /Xam peoples used the term “kukummi” to refer to all types of narrative, which indicates a lack of perceived division within the /Xam oral corpus: stories, songs, poems, and dance become intertwined under such term. Thus, in at least early South African oral art forms, storytelling and poetry were one and the same, spreading human experience and connectivity through art. Judging by the trends in South African poetics over time (as will be examined in Chapter 2), it is likely that such inclusiveness is part of the foundation of the textual practice, as contemporary poets still infuse dance and music into their performances.

The idea of “kukummi” can be expanded upon metaphorically. While the term literally refers to textual forms, the concept of unity and blending is relevant in poetic

hermeneutics as well. As any one text is perceived as equivalent to any other form, understanding oneself is equal to the understanding of others. By sharing personal experiences and understanding his or her place, the speaker can connect with the audience on a deeper level. Benjamin's storytellers possess

the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier. (Benjamin 102)

To reach the human interiority, for storytelling, is the crux of its aims, much as it is for poetry. In essence, the poem seeks to reveal the humanity in current and past experiences. Mpho Khosi, a contemporary spoken word poet in South Africa, reveals "I write to tell stories, I write to relate to whoever is willing to lend an ear; stories about where I am from, who I am. I write about our people, what makes them who they are" (Khosi Interview). For him, the poem *is* a story, it is what connects his experiences to those around him. In Benjamin's setting, storytellers need to understand themselves and their own humanity in order to form these human connections, and Khosi's indication of writing (and speaking) poetry primarily about himself and his experiences furthers such a notion.

1.2.II Intransitive Relations with Reality

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (Barthes 142)

This is how Barthes begins his discussion of how, in fact, the author “dies” through the act of writing. This subsection seeks to demonstrate that, even though the oral poet functions through the “humanized” persona instead of the glorified, pedestaled written author of Barthes’ conception, their work mirrors the intransitivity of written texts. While oral poetic text itself is intransitive and seeks simply “the symbol itself” as Barthes’ does, the authorial voice cannot and does not lose “its origin” due to the author’s physical presence in the transmission.

This concept can best be understood through W.H. Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” An excerpt of the second section of the poem reads:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
 In the valley of its making where executives
 Would never want to tamper, flows on south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
 A way of happening, a mouth. (Auden 98)

For Auden, poetry is not an actor but a peripheral entity. It “makes nothing happen” and simply “survives” – it is passive, not active. Viewing poetry as “a way of happening, a mouth” positions it as a mode of transmission, an interlocutor between thought and audience. While it does not act upon a specific reality, it offers a platform for others to do

so. Khosi, introduced above, explains that his poetry is a way to “tell stories... about where I am from, who I am” (Khosi Interview). In this sense, the oral poem is that which survives in Auden’s “raw towns that we believe and die in” – within the essence of the everyday life.

Often, South African oral poetry focuses on social and political issues, serving to shed light on the worst aspects of South African society. Because of colonialism and apartheid, such aims have been present within the poetry throughout the genre’s history, spanning from Zulu condemnations of the West through the degradation of books and guns to contemporary frustrations toward hatred and racism. During apartheid, this aim of social consciousness is most clear. In the political sphere, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) developed as a response to the Sharpeville Massacre and further galvanized due to The Soweto Uprising.¹ Steve Biko, the founding father of the movement, explained that the locus of the struggle lay in “the realization of blacks that the most powerful weapon at the hands of the oppressor is the oppressed” (Brown 169). The movement sought equality within the country through the black population’s assertion of their own intellectual authority and capabilities. The protest poems functioned as a critical piece of this struggle against apartheid. These poems “distilled the black consciousness ideals into a poetic voice” from the 1970s onward, seeking social change through artistic modes of speech (Brown 174). Because the apartheid regime sought to silence the oppressed (namely non-white South Africans), oral poetry functioned as a clandestine mode of dissemination. Poets sought to represent the

¹ The Sharpeville Massacre occurred on March 21, 1960. The police killed numerous black African civilians during peaceful protests of the Pass laws within the Sharpeville Township. The Soweto Uprising occurred on June 16, 1976. The protest, led by high-school students fighting against virulent state brutality, ended in countless injuries and deaths among the students. This event also served to galvanize the protest poetry movement as a critical facet of the struggle.

shortcomings of the system through their words, and inspired their listeners with their messages. The poems would be “memorized, passed on, and performed in a variety of contexts,” circulating such political platforms within a system that suppressed such positions (Brown 182).

These 1970s protest poems may seem to be “making nothing happen” if one only examines the works from the authorial perspective (Auden 98). While the oral mode of dissemination “accords well... with [conceptions of poetry] of the modern social revolutionary seeking to restore vitality and to rescue man from the horror of immutability,” it does not effect change in and of itself (Brown 181 quoting Mazamane). The poems themselves did not speak to politicians or protest on a visible scale; they simply proffered a message amongst the township communities which would, the poets hoped, inspire change within its recipients. Viewing the government as the locus of actual change, the recipients function within Barthes’ conception of the “symbol” as the representation and actionable entities of such change. KB Kilobyte, a contemporary South African poet, explains that his poetry is a means of challenging social issues “without saying it to [the] leadership” and locates its role as being “to teach, reveal what is concealed and inspire people” (Ringane Web and E-mail Interviews). The people, then, are who act in direct concert with reality; the poetry simply functions as an interlocutor in this process.

Ultimately, oral poetry as seen through the South African lens serves a similar purpose to written text in the sense of its intransitivity. This circuitousness does not diminish its role. Without poetry or other texts, recipients would not necessarily be inspired to seek change. The poets’ role, then, is to provide “A way of happening, a

mouth,” a transitory measure within the greater scheme of social change (Auden 98).

While the poem itself does not make anything happen directly, its influence and potential for inspiration as well as social and racial unification may spur change through other sources.

1.3 Conclusion

In terms of Barthes’ author’s “death,” the South African oral poet occupies a complicated position. As can be seen through this section, the poet necessarily must take up a differing stance within the textual sphere than the written author (“individualized” versus “humanized” authors). While the “individualized” author necessarily must undergo a “death” in order for his or her works to speak, the oral, “humanized” writer cannot fully realize such a state due to his or her immediate presence in the transmissive moment. The audience must simultaneously recognize the humanity within their speaker and repress the poet’s state of individuality (in favor of a more humanized role, which would serve to create an artificial sense of closeness between speaker and listener) in order to apply their own perceptions and goals upon the text itself. Essentially, the oral poet is placed within the paradoxical position of a sort of “dead man walking” – simultaneously without formal authorial identity and yet physically present.

Chapter 2: The Concept of Origin

Tracing Cultural and Textual Histories Through South African Poetics

For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins. (Barthes 146)

For Barthes, textual originality does not exist; every piece of writing is somehow informed by other modes of text, culture, and interaction. To see how “The Death of the Author” applies to South African oral poetry, the concept of the “origin” is a central tenant of Barthes’ work that begs to be explored. This chapter seeks to understand South African origins in a non-theoretical, but rather anthropological and historical lens: what sorts of societies did South Africans live in and how did these structures influence and carry forth poetic tendencies? Moving from the pre-colonial age up through the apartheid era, we explore how multi-media, politics, religion, and community are fostered throughout history. The existence of such themes throughout this history begs to assure Barthes that yes, these oral texts are, like writing, informed by their predecessors.

Barthes’ conception of origins includes a broad sense of unoriginality – everything that is said now is somehow taken or transformed from previous ideas and writings. In order to understand how such concepts function in today’s oral poetics in South Africa, one must have a foundational understanding of the movements within this genre of poetry to see what inclusions have survived and infiltrated contemporary performances and poetic thinkers. While oral poetics have been present throughout South Africa’s history, this chapter seeks to elucidate the history of the country’s poetics from pre-colonial and indigenous origins and during apartheid. Though many more intricacies

could be added to this timeline, these periods are utilized both for a degree of brevity as well as to demonstrate a delineation between pre-colonial conceptions, and the changes and adaptations within both colonized and apartheid states. The main conceptions discussed are the cultural and ethnic focuses of the earlier eras, the concept of “kukummi,” political momentum, and religious motivations. This historical underpinning will inform our study in Chapter 3 on contemporary poetry’s multi-dimensional nature. The chapter then moves to explore how, theoretically, these conceptions hold through, supported mostly through the application of Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia*. The presence of the oral speaker, though, complicates this relationship and leaves a recipient’s understanding of these connected origins potentially blurred in a way writing would not; in this sense, the oral speaker diverges from Barthes’ written, “deceased” author.

2.1 Indigenous Origins of Orality

Attempting to tackle the origins of South African oral poetry is certainly a tall task. In the pre-colonial era, there existed hundreds of indigenous groups of peoples both roaming and geographically stable in the southern tip of Africa, therefore it is theoretically impossible to map the scope of poetic activity which occurred. For these purposes, this study will examine the communal nature of the /Xam people of the western coast and the Xhosa and Zulu peoples of the eastern coast due to a greater substantiation of previous scholarly attention to such groups. These case studies seek to demonstrate the broad nature of text, the communal and nationalist tendencies, the political influences, and the beginnings of Western influence within indigenous forms of poetic text.

2.1.I The /Xam People

The /Xam indigenous group features a lack of stratification, which is critically important for understanding the function of poetry within such communities; instead of upholding a literary elite or delineated poetic class, the group maintained a form of literature accessible to all members (Brown 49). Beyond a lack of a literarily elite class, the /Xam community possessed “no clearly defined leader,” opting to live respectfully of others’ spaces without any sort of political mandate to do so (Brown 38). Families lived together in defined areas and typically in proximity to other families in the group (Brown 38). Living amongst such camaraderie naturally led to the need for communal forms of entertainment; thus, the development of oral modes of storytelling and poetry for the /Xam people seems almost prefigured. The poetry itself fuses music and storytelling in a form that can be easily associated with poetry. This blurring of forms confuses the Western conception of prose poetry, yet creates an emotionally evocative manner to express cultural realities and traditions through a commonly accessible mode of entertainment. This perspective of /Xam poetry is ironically quite similar to the aims of Western, inscribed poetry at that time.

While /Xam culture, with its non-hierarchical values, likely allowed any member of the community to perform poetic stories for the group, there was still a means of judgment for the performers. A “good” storyteller would be qualified based on their knowledge of the “Old People” and on their verbal capacity (Brown 54). Knowledge of the “Old People” is signified by one’s closeness both to nature and to animals. The group used the term “kukummi” to refer to all types of narrative, including that expressed through storytelling, dance, movement, and poetry. These stories and poems covered

broad topics, namely, “The problem points of living, such as marriage and sex, the food quest, sharing, family relationships, the division of labour, birth and death, murder, and blood vengeance” (Brown 54 quoting Biesele).² While the stories professed a spectrum of topics, they possessed no formal distinction between that which was sacred and that which was profane (Brown 54).

The concept of “kukummi” will prove useful, as it demonstrates the lack of stratification between narrative expressed through stories, dance, movement, and poetry. The term encompasses the multi-modal aspects of South African spoken word poetry and forms the basis of such a performative spectrum that continues throughout the genre’s history. Not only are the /Xam people non-hierarchical socially, but they also profess a textual culture which seems to value varying modes of dissemination equally.

2.1.II Xhosa and Zulu Peoples

Concomitant to the existence of /Xam culture in the nineteenth century but residing on the other side of the country were the Xhosa and Zulu peoples. Such cultures varied widely from the west-coast societies, with the Zulu functioning as highly stratified hierarchy under a monarchical power; most famous was the Zulu king Shaka kaSenzangakhona (known more colloquially as Shaka Zulu). Not only was this system hierarchical, but it was highly patriarchal as well. The Xhosa communities did not function in such a manner, but existed in more dispersed communities with a lower degree of concern for national unity. These systems gave way to the most formative era of South African orality and, as Duncan Brown argues, “the highest form of literary

² This quotation is in reference to the !Kung culture, though Brown speaks of them as largely interchangeable in terms of orality with the /Xam culture.

expression in almost all African societies on the subcontinent:” the *izibongo* or praise poems (Brown 76).

Designated royal poets, called *imbongi* or praise poets, produced the *izibongo* poems in order to praise (or critique) the Zulu king in power. The *imbongi* held a prestigious position within society, as he was the only individual allowed to publicly make commentary on the regime due to his “poetic license.” The *imbongi* “negotiate[s] relations of political power within society” as well as “articulates the expectations subjects have of their ruler... delivers praise for political and military successes” and functions as a mediator within society (Brown 91-2). In addition to this tall order, the praise poet must function as the “conscience of the nation” or as an “historian” (Brown 96, Scheub 478). Thus, the poet gains his position through the support and acclaim of the people in his society instead of receiving a reserved position or gaining notoriety through heredity.

In keeping with the role of the *imbongi* as a communal historian, the Zulu *izibongo* poems functioned largely as a mode of reflecting upon and recording history. Their focus on the past cultivated national pride and a sense of historical continuity within the kingdom (Brown 108-9). These poems are not rote recollections of a historical trajectory, but a non-linear assemblage of past experiences. Harold Scheub, a professor of African Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, claims that the “process [of *izibongo* poetry recitations] seems random only if the observer is seeking the chronological sequence of history” (485). Again, this is an instance in which Western conceptions of time may cloud an observer’s understanding of South African modes of literary preservation and remembrance. This lack of chronology stems from the fact that

these poems fuse “the ideal past and the flawed present” (Scheub 487). The varying temporalities function to romanticize the past through heroism and achievement while the current moment is typically framed to espouse a loss of these ideals (Scheub 489).

While the truth of the poem lies in the past, the action subsists in the present, as the *izibongo* functions as an “active social force” which cultivates a relationship between the *imbongi* and his audience (Scheub 489). What is most central to these poems is this shared sentiment; to some, it is what is most important in the poem because it is this emotive draw that orients the poem so strongly within its own history (Scheub 483). In fact, the *imbongi* “cannot make public his private feelings without the emotions of the audience” (Scheub 487).

It is precisely this hermeneutic process that allows the society as a whole to experience and reflect upon individual emotions. Benedict Walter Vilakazi, a Zulu writer, asserts that such poetry “passes from being an objective presentation of great deeds to become poetry of feeling and intuition” (Scheub 487). The feeling within the *imbongi* and the poetry itself can swell to such magnitudes that it can bring about emotions quite tangibly within its participants. The Sotho national poem “Mokorotlo” or the “Song of the Enemies” involves a warrior recounting the details of war, in which

He would stab the ground a number of times equal to the number of enemy soldiers he had killed. As he did that, the group that surrounded him would join in, crying out each time he touched the spear to the ground. (Scheub 492)

Such responses resulted from a simultaneous recollection of the past as well as a present “sensation of physical experience” (Scheub 478). These oral praise poems were not

simply intended to demonstrate the feelings of an individual, but to trigger a “stirring up of emotions” within the community at large (Scheub 484). It is precisely this shared emotional response that “aroused cultural consciousness” within the Xhosa and Zulu communities and fostered a stronger sense of patriotism (Scheub 491, 493).

Emotion was not only the impact of this poetry; Xhosa poets derived the poetry itself through spontaneous passionate outbursts. Mvuyelelo Khafu, a Xhosa poet, views this emotional process as “an inspired activity” in which the “images come to him during the actual process of performance... as in a dream and without his conscious knowledge” (Scheub 491). Because this mode of creation is so extemporaneous, the poet “cannot repeat the poem once [he or she has] completed it, because it is not [he or she] who says it. It comes on its own” (Scheub 491). The linkage between emotion and poetry is most strongly realized through in-person performance; it “necessitates... a lacing of time and space; it requires event and spontaneity and loses its identity when frozen in memory or writing” (Scheub 492).

Because Xhosa poems are often previously unplanned, the *imbongi* relies on recurring tropes that offer form to the *izibongo* poems. Generally, poets pull from what they have heard in performance previously and they are not taught specific modes of presentation or typical linear structures. The poems are, in a sense, a palimpsest of preceding poems intertwined with the performing poets’ own artistic additions and opinions. Some of these habitual tropes include routine speech patterns, cyclical repetition, and metaphorical allusions.

It is important to note that Zulu poetic practices did not engage with such spontaneity as Xhosa poetry did, but placed “emphasis on collection and memorization”

(Brown 90). In fact, these poems attempted to memorialize society at a specific point in time to maintain social cohesion and unity through the varying ruling monarchs. Because the Xhosa people were so dispersed geographically, they did not have as strong of a concern as the Zulu people toward patriotic nationalism and did not seek to create a memorialized history, but rather sought to evoke emotion and recall an idealized past more broadly.

Routine speech patterns for the Xhosa assist both the poet and the audience in placing the performance as an *izibongo* poem. Scheub notes that the “line” depends not only on these patterns, but is directed by “the uniqueness of poetic diction and the particular performance, during which those patterns are heightened and otherwise exaggerated, if not distorted, and long, high tone syllables are emphasized” (Scheub 480). Of course, the specific experience of *izibongo* and the individual performer infuse meaning and passion into the poem, the *imbongi* “takes liberties” but

he always returns to [the form], keeping it functioning through repetition so that it retains its molding character through such alterations. Because it provides the form of the poem, it contributes to its meaning; it is not simply a rhythmic background or metronome. (Scheub 480)

Part of these speech patterns is the display of repeated outbursts of emotion. Commonly, *izibongo* possess

a series of major and minor explosions, with succeeding images connected to the explosions, moderating them, and developing into the line; a series of lines becomes a theme of sound in the poem and may dominate it entirely or be worked in conjunction with other patterns. (Scheub 480)

Such “explosions” are closely derived from the emotional impetus of the poem itself.

It is critical to note the complication in reception scholars today face in regard to *izibongo* poetry. Because such poems derive so much of their vitality through their spoken delivery, an on-paper analysis will never fully grasp the full extent of complexities such a poem would possess. While the appreciation of such performance can only truly be achieved through an immediate interaction, Harold Scheub’s delineation of an *imbongi*’s tone attempts to close the gap between a modern day researcher and the *imbongi*’s intentions themselves.

B**	B— B— B—	BC*—\
A— A— A—		A—
I—NDLE—L'E—SA—SI—HA—MBA—NGA—YO//		
The way	by which we travelled,	

B**	B—	BC*—\
A— A— A—		A—
YA—YI—KHWE—Z'A—MA—HLA—THI,//		
It skirted	the forests,	

B**	B—	BC*—\
A— A— A— A—		A—
YA—YI—CHU—CH'I—MI—LA—MBO,//		
It hopped across	the rivers,	

B**	B—	BC*—\
A— A— A—		A—
YA—YI—NDO—NTS'II—NTA—BA!!!		
It leapt over	the mountains! ¹³	

The images above depict Scheub's annotations of the first few lines of a Xhosa praise poem in honor of an ancient king named Jojo, performed by the poet Mvuyelelo Khafu. Scheub uses symbols, including *, –, and //, to represent the *imbongi*'s intonation. The notation (**) signifies a “major explosion of sound” which is typical of an opening line in *izibongo* (Scheub 480). The long dashes throughout the lines indicate “the expansible low-noted chant” which comprises the majority of the poem (Scheub 480). And finally, the end of the line is notated with (//) to represent “the breaking of the regular chant with a rise of tone, and a glide downward to the predominantly lower note, often with a minor explosion (*)” (Scheub 480).

As the images elucidate, each line falls within a formulaic pattern of explosions and chanting. The methodical chanting counterbalances the complexities each individual *imbongi* will create in their performances. While new chants and concepts may be introduced, a degree of similitude and repetition still exists that offers the audience a sense of order. The inclusion of such repetition creates, for Scheub, a sense of urgency and deepens the audience's connection with the past (Scheub 481).

While *izibongo* are commonly directed toward the reigning monarch, for the Zulu people such poems can also praise individuals in society. The *isithopho*, a personal praise name granted by either the individual themselves or by peers and family, becomes elaborated into a personal *izibongo* later in life. The personal *izibongo* is

highly intertextual, since they often include elements which are self-composed, others which are drawn from the praises of friends, relatives, or ancestors, praises which are given by other people, or which are simply part of the cultural currency of the society. (Brown 87)

Personal *izibongo* can be performed for both men and women despite the fact that the Zulu society functioned under patriarchal relations.

The royal *izibongo* in Zulu society can be seen as “an extension, development, and formalization of personal *izibongo*” (Brown 88). Often, such poems sought to commemorate the greatness of a king or reflect on the nation’s heroic past. Interestingly enough, though, the conception of the *izibongo* as simply “praise poems” is, to Brown, “something of a misnomer” due to the fact that *imbongi* were also “‘licensed’ by the poetic form to criticize the king when this is perceived to be necessary” (Brown 91). In addition to praise and criticism, “the *imbongi* articulates the expectations subjects have of their ruler, and he delivers praise for political and military successes” (Brown 91). The poet, then, serves the kingdom instead of the king, functioning as a mediator between the monarch and the people.

This poetic license, while debated, seems to have granted much authority to the *imbongi*. This influence seems to be accepted because it functions as a means of “‘ritual of rebellion’ which functions to confirm the validity of the kingship by institutionalizing criticism,” according to Jeff Opland (Brown 92). While it is honorable that Zulu monarchs permitted such honesty, some *izibongo* touted harsh critique. Mtshiki, the son of an early nineteenth century ruler, received the following *izibongo* from the *imbongi*:

He’s a fart who expels wind,
 whose bum puckered as his guts ballooned,
 then filled once again as the air erupted.
 A dandy, a transient with wanderlust,
 lounge on struts, like a man of great beauty.

(Brown 93 cited from Opland)

Documented critique of his father demonstrated similar negativity, though through a more sexual lens. Interestingly enough, Brown acknowledges that such “sexual references are generally not evident in recorded *izibongo*, either because the texts have been bowdlerized, or because the *izimbongi* were reluctant to use such language in front of those recording their performances” (Brown 93). Documentation was not devoid of political criticism, though. Even the notorious king, Shaka Zulu, received critique from his *imbongi*. Understanding the role of the *imbongi* not only as a performative artist but also as a political commentator not only fosters a great sense of legitimacy of the oral poet as a valuable facet of art, but also contributes to our understanding of the inherently political and curbing role of poetics (and art more broadly) within South African society from early, pre-colonial times. This importance will continue throughout the poetic mode’s development over time, and functions as a central facet of the genre: that is the poet as critic and revealer of the “uncomfortable” truth (Labiran Interview).

Unfortunately, the ability for a full understanding of *izibongo* poetry dissipated with the end of the Zulu and Xhosa eras, due to complications in transcription and the distortion of transmission when the poetry is not delivered directly from the artist. Under this acknowledgement, the information a contemporary scholar can garner in regard to Zulu and Xhosa poetry is crucial to the understanding of the development of oral poetics in South Africa in its totality. Most notable are the ability that spoken poetics provided both for personal uplift and social critique as well as the creation of a sense of group identity. It is this sense of verbal freedom and individuality that promulgates itself strongly within the fight against apartheid through spoken word.

2.1.III The Zulu Movement Towards Christianity

After the infiltration of European missionaries into African tribal lifestyles, oral poetics began to take the shape of Christian hymns. Notably in the Zulu culture, this poetic shift resulted in a fusion of Zulu and Christian modes of literature rather than a complete adaptation of Christian literary modes. The works focused concomitantly on religious and political aims. As the Zulu kingship weakened due to Western oppression, such hybridized poetry flourished.

The retention of Zulu values in conjunction with the integration of Christian forms functioned as a means of resistance to colonial and religious oppression. Isaiah Shembe, a messianic Zulu evangelist prophet and founder of the Church of the Nazarites (Ibandla lamaNazaretha), is considered to be one of the most influential leaders in this context (Brown 119). His church aimed to revitalize and preserve the Zulu culture in a way mission churches disregarded. Shembe's "Hymn 45" functions to demonstrate this hybridity, displaying what Brown terms as Zulu "social concerns" and Christian "theological and future-directed" concerns (Brown 120).

1. I shouted day and night
 why did you not hear me?
 Nations go to sleep that Zulus may be audible
 before the uMsindisi [Diety]

2. I was stopped by all the nations
 which are under heaven.

Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible
before the uMsindisi

3. You maiden of Nazareth
may you cry like a rushing stream
about the disgrace that has befallen you
in the land of your people.
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible
before the uMsindisi.

4. You young men of Nazareth
you cry all like a rushing stream,
about the disgrace that has befallen you
you young men of Shaka
before the uMsindisi.

(Brown 121 citing Oosthuizen)

These poetic hymns are contained within the *Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha* (the hymnal of the Church of the Nazarites). This text, arising in 1940, functioned as one of the central compilations of scripture within this church. While it functions visually as numerically delineated stanzas, its substance relates to the destruction and degradation of the Zulu kingdom.

The poem, while maintaining traditionally Christian delineations, still refers to the deity “uMsindisi,” a notably African term. This fusion demonstrates the incorporation of,

but not entirely adopted, Christianity within the African context. The poem is still directed toward the “young men [and maiden] of Nazareth” and the “young men of Shaka,” which further elucidates alliance both to the Christian and African heritages. Despite the inclusion of both alliances, it becomes clear that Shembe maintains his allegiance to his African heritage more fervently, as the poem repeats the phrase, “Nations go to sleep so Zulu may be audible.” Nations, perhaps figured as divisions promulgated by colonial interests, must be silenced in order for the African heritage to resurge.

This sort of scripture functions to hearken back to a sense of Zulu nationalism, much as the previous forms of Zulu oral poetics intended to achieve, although such nationalism functions in new ways, such as

look[ing] back to the Zulu nationalism of Shaka, although [the hymns] draw this nationalism into a context of colonial subordination; and they look forward, through the doctrine of the Black Christ, to the political concerns of black consciousness and black theology. (Brown 124)

Religion is an outlet which any segment of society can access; therefore these poems functioned as an egalitarian platform by which to reinvigorate a sense of nationalism. Brown’s designation of the poetic aims of instilling black “consciousness” and “theology” connotes a sense of awareness not only of Western influences, but of the ways in which they can supplement – not replace – the existing culture. While Zulu society professed divisions of power, the infiltration of the West brought with it stratification of knowledge as well, delineating educated forms of understanding and verse from more popular or common modes of communication.

2.2 Poetic Developments of the Apartheid Era

South African protest poetry during apartheid, which reached its heights in the 1970s and 80s, was born out of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). In order to begin to understand this era, one must understand the political context of this movement. The term “black consciousness” refers to a specific movement during the height of apartheid in which the black population acknowledged its own power and professed a sense of cultural pride. The Sharpeville Massacre (March 21, 1960), a tragedy in which South African police killed sixty-nine black African civilians during peaceful protests of the Pass laws³ in the Sharpeville Township, functioned as the original catalyst of this movement. This moment in South African history marked a turning point in the apartheid regime in that it gave way to massive crackdowns of restrictive governmental policies.

Arising mostly on black college campuses, the movement rallied youth together to galvanize a greater backlash on behalf of the black South African population against the oppressive white regime. Steve Biko, a key activist during the apartheid era, founded an organization called the South African Students’ Organization (SASO). The organization formally developed the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) shortly thereafter.

Biko claimed that the root of the movement was “the realization of blacks that the most powerful weapon at the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Brown 169). Operating under the mantra of “black humanism,” the movement rallied the black population together to fight for equality and freedom from the oppressive regime. The rally cry of the movement was “Black man, you’re on your own,” highlighting a

³ The Pass laws were a system put in place by the apartheid regime to maintain segregation within society. Passes were designated as identifications cards delineating the holder’s ethnic ties and assigned homeland. They functioned to monitor and limit the movement of non-white civilians within South Africa.

recognition that this freedom would not be granted in turn, but must be peaceably advocated for through the activists' own abilities (Brown 169). Ironically, at the BCM's outset, the state supported its growth due to their beliefs that "it was promoting the kind of tribal separatism that apartheid was seeking to enforce" (Brown 169). Ultimately, the movement did not seek for separatism at all, but sought equality within the country through the black population's assertion of their own intellectual authority and capabilities. Biko concisely delineates the essence of the movement: "The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination of the black to rise and attain the envisaged self" (Brown 170).

Oral poetry of this era – what is referred to more broadly as "protest poetry" – derived its origins out of this movement and distilled the Black Consciousness ideals into a poetic voice. Drawing on the ideals of black empowerment and the desire for an equal society, the era sought substantive political change through the promulgation of such poetry (though the actuality of such aims are *intransitive* instead of direct, as elaborated in Chapter 1). Though apartheid era poetry begun in the 1950s, these poems sought a white, liberal audience within which to inspire change. After the Soweto Uprising and the uptake of the BCM, the movement shifted to a black African audience.

Protest poetry touted many different influences, seeking inspiration in *izibongo* poetics, "in jazz and blues music, African-American verse, the rhetoric of the political platform, and even plain speech" (Brown 174). Though performed largely in English in order to dissuade the tribal divisions fostered by apartheid, the poems' language trended toward disjointedness and improper grammatical structures, drawing on "Americanisms, expletives, tsotsi-taal and the terminology of black power" (Brown 174). Essentially,

protest poetry of the 1970's fused the loose structure from Shaka's *izibongo* with the breath unit of American "projective verse," a form of oral poetics (Brown 181).

The poetry not only condemned apartheid, but also rejected and criticized Western influence more broadly. The frustrations stemmed from the apartheid-mandated educational structure, in which schools were designated based on racially assigned homelands or "Bantustans."⁴ The Bantu schools offered a lesser degree of education than the white schools in the cities provided. Namely, black schools denied its students access to most Western forms of literature and culture. In a counteraction of this deficiency, Bantu youth formed a reliance on their own modes of cultural preservation and artistry through oral and written poetics.

The Soweto Uprising (June 16, 1976), a protest led by high-school students met with virulent state brutality, marked a pivotal point in not only the fight against the chains of apartheid more broadly, but also marked the galvanization of the protest poetry movement as a critical facet of the struggle. Due to a fear of continued police brutality, many poets adopted a verbal dissemination method in order to avoid both violence and censorship. The poems would be "memorized, passed on, and performed in a variety of contexts" (Brown 182). The memorization and dissemination of these poems is critical; while these activists could not openly spread their opinions through political platforms, the memorability of literature functioned to fill the void and circulate anti-apartheid sentiments through black communities more broadly.

The poems sought social change through artistic modes of speech. Favoring an oral mode of dissemination "accords well... with [conceptions of poetry] of the modern

⁴ A Bantustan was a geographic area in which an assigned racial group (such as "blacks" or "coloreds") was mandated to live under the apartheid regime. Its implementation was one of the foremost means of racial separation at the time.

social revolutionary seeking to restore vitality and to rescue man from the horror of immutability” (Brown 181 quoting Mazamane). The performance nature of such poems not only increased its influence within the black community in a way print would not have been able to at the time, but also created a sense of community much as the *izibongo* and /Xam poems did decades before. The performances necessitated audience attendance and participation, creating a hermeneutic process that connected the attendees through a shared sense of experience. The poems were constructed in simpler forms of English so “even the layman [could] understand it” (Brown 182). The poetic community was no longer reserved for the educational elite as it had in a sense during the years of Zulu-Christian poetic hybridity in the early twentieth century, but reinforced a sense of unity and equality that opposed the entire basis of apartheid.

Language, though, was not the entirety of the performance: “Music, dance, comedy, mime, gesture, and other visual devices were stressed in various attempts at popularization and to evoke an immediate display of emotion” (Brown 184 quoting Sole). Harkening back to the *izibongo* era, other performative modes of expression were employed in the poems, creating a stimulating and engaging visual entertainment experience, perhaps what one could refer to as, in the sense of the word’s most common usage, a spectacle.

One of the seminal BCM protest poets during this era was Ingoapele Madingoane, famous for his anthology *africa my beginning*. The book was banned by the South African Publications Control Board for distribution due to a multitude of violations as deemed by the apartheid regime. Such violations included references to Steve Biko and Hector Peterson, the invocation of ancestral help in the liberation struggle, the projection

for a victory in Namibia and Azania⁵ and the sanctioning of communist actions (Brown 165).

Though the distribution of the book was prohibited, Madingoane continued to recite his pieces clandestinely in shebeens⁶ and around as he had before the poems appeared in print. The poems maintained such a degree of influence within the Soweto Township that “many township youths in the late 1970s could recite the whole of the ‘black trial’ sequence from memory” (Brown 166).⁷ Through speech, the poems were not only disseminated throughout a wide audience despite their banning in print, but also avoided coerced state censorship and the “‘gate-keeping’ practiced by white-controlled literary magazines” (Brown 4).

Black literary artists attempted to forge their own public voice through the printing of magazines in protest of the stifling aims of white-controlled literary magazines. *Staffrider* was a literary magazine founded in 1978 that purported aims of democracy and the establishment of a “‘direct line’ with the community” (Brown 175). The first issue of which was banned due to concerns that the poems “undermined the authority and image of the police” (Brown 176).

The dialectic between oral and written poetry is a complicated one. With the birth of *Staffrider* and other black-centric literary magazines came an increase in printed forms of originally spoken poetics. Many poets as well as their poems, straddled the line between the two genres in the sense that they needed to be colloquial enough to resonate orally but maintain a sense of structure to be appreciated on the page. This duality led to a

⁵ The term “Azania” was considered to be a terrorist term referencing South Africa

⁶ Defined by Merriam-Webster as “an unlicensed or illegally operated drinking establishment.” Shebeens are commonly found in South African townships.

⁷ “black trial” was one of the poems within Madingoane’s *africa my beginning* anthology

prioritization to written poems simply due to the fact that they were, and still are, most accessible. Mongane Wally Serote, another Soweto poet, both wrote and performed poetry but is often remembered and reviewed most for his written poems while his oral poems have received little critical attention (Brown 166). Critics mark Madingoane as an oral poet even in printed forms of his work, though, which brings up questions or concerns with regard to the manner in which a reader may be guided or led to understand a work of poetry in general. Does the knowledge of an intended performance change the manner in which a reader approaches the poem on the page? Does it give way for certain allowances that an originally written piece of poetry would not require?

This struggle is certainly unavoidable in contemporary research of the topic and such questions cannot be answered without extensive field research. Without technological advances in mass modes of preservation, such as the Internet, the access to performances of such works was, and is, limited to first-person experiences. As a researcher working in 2016, access to such works is nearly impossible. Even printed versions of such poems are sparsely distributed. This restricted access reminds a researcher and reader that the remnants of protest poetry are limited and may not wholly represent the entirety of the movement's reality.

To gain a broader understanding of protest poetry in the 1970s, Madingoane's poem "Africa My Beginning, Africa My Ending," originally a performance piece, functions as a strong example of the BCM influence within this poetic era. The piece promotes a sense of Pan-Africanism as a means against colonial incursion (i.e. the white man). It opens in a reflection back to this first permeation of Europeans into Africa:

They came from the west
 Sailing to the east
 With hatred and disease flowing
 From their flesh
 And a burden to harden our lives

Throughout the poem, Madingoane references non-Africans with the pronoun “they” despite direct denotations by name of African activists and politicians. Further, the Europeans’ flaws “flow” from their “flesh,” much as black or African people have been denigrated for theirs. These linguistic choices subvert the racial tensions of the encounter both to reveal the African perspective (which may have often gone ignored) as well as to align flaws that the white men placed on Africans back upon the colonists. Often, such Western conceptions would position “natives” as the ones with “disease” due to “their flesh.” To an extent, this perspective reversal dehumanizes the Europeans in a similar manner to how these invaders perceived Africans.

The language employs minimal metaphors, rather electing to be pointedly straightforward; the colonists are “exploiters” and liars through the veiling of colonial imperatives in the guise of friendship: “They claimed to be friends / ... / And when foreigner met foreigner / They fought for the reign / Exploiters of Africa.” The poem also minimizes any sense of structure, not only poetically but also grammatically. While Madingoane repeats the refrain “Africa my beginning / And Africa my ending,” the rest of the poem seems to unfold randomly. There are no stanzas, rhyme schemes, or marks of punctuation. These omissions may intend to call attention toward a rejection of standard Western modes of poetry and language.

The political and communal aims are glaring in this piece. References to Robert Mugabe, Agostinho Neto, and Sam Nujoma call attention to the liberation struggles in

Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia respectively.⁸ Movement between languages from English to Swahili, Portuguese, and Zulu encapsulate a sense of Pan-Africanism through their unmediated flow. These consistent allusions to African history, culture, and leaders places a burden on the reader or listener to either already know the political environment or to seek knowledge on the topic. This call for comprehension revitalizes the African struggle beyond South Africa and keeps its history alive in the poem's performance or reading; an audience in the 1970s would be enlightened by the southern African strife in countries like Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique and Namibia and galvanized to seek further change in their own country of South Africa. Madingoane positions these leaders as beacons of hope and inspiration, with Mugabe proliferating a sense of brotherhood, Neto inspiring human sentiment, and Nujoma's endurance. Such men inspire Madingoane to come forth from Africa's painful history – “come from apartheid in tatters” – to return to his homeland, likely the Africa before colonialism. Madingoane attempts to proffer a similar vision for his listeners, ending the piece with the lines “Lets do something / Mbopha,” which roughly translated from Zulu means “bound for.” This forward thinking and actionable call aims for the galvanization of African audiences typical of 1970s protest poetry.

⁸ Robert Mugabe is a former leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). He is the current President of Zimbabwe, serving since 1987. Agostinho Neto was the leader of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and a prominent figure during the Portuguese Colonial War. He subsequently became the first leader of Angola upon its gain of independence from Portugal at the conclusion of the war in 1975. Neto is also considered a distinguished Angolan poet. Samuel Daniel “Shafiishuna” Nujoma was a Namibian activist and politician, serving as the President of Namibia from 1990-2005.

2.2.I Implications of Apartheid Era Poetry

Poetry in speech, as noted above, serves to provide a voice to groups or individuals whose voices are not heard in mainstream modes of communication. Shari Stone-Mediatore, in her book *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*, explains the impacts of such modes of interaction. While she speaks more broadly of “marginalized experience narratives” rather than protest poetry specifically, her observations still hold resonance. She claims:

Marginal experience narratives contribute to political thinking and political life precisely in their function as ‘stories,’ that is, as experience-rooted but creatively reproduced narrative texts whose meaning is realized in their interpretation by specific communities. (Stone-Mediatore 5)

If one can understand a work of protest poetry as a narrative of the black South African experience (or perhaps even African more broadly, such as exemplified in Madingoane’s “Africa My Beginning, Africa My Ending”), Stone-Mediatore’s conjecture holds credence. It is in the poems’ direction toward subjugated communities that they find their own meaning, that is, the drive to fight back against institutions of white oppression.

Stone-Mediatore’s conception moves on to explore the relationship between story and truth. In mainstream societies, central institutions propagate the “truth,” leaving the perceptions and realities of subjugated groups on the periphery. Without such institutional backing, the “stories of marginalized people tend to conflict with ‘common sense knowledge’ and to enter public discussion explicitly as stories” (Stone-Mediatore 6). Without this institutional codification, peripheral stories lose the legitimacy of historicity and instead rely on personal anecdotes and other “informal records” such as

“explicitly literary, creative styles because the analytic categories of ‘objective’ historiography are inadequate to the experience of the people struggling against oppression” (Stone-Mediatore 7). In essence, under this assumption creative modes such as oral poetry would be some of the only methods of historical preservation in subjugated communities because of their separation from the institutional modes of recording that sought to exclude such marginalized experiences.

This creative mode of “storytelling,” though, propagates communal tendencies within the subjugated class. Hannah Arendt, a renowned political theorist, explains, “storytelling also engages its audience in the interpretive process because its task of understanding a strange phenomenon... is never complete but must be endlessly pursued by each one of us” (Stone-Mediatore 63). Interpretation, at its core, necessitates engagement. Oral poetry, and especially protest poetry, insists upon an audience to process and respond to the ideas such poetry pronounces. For Stone-Mediatore, such hermeneutics “promotes the kind of intellectual skills and attitudes that are essential to... civic culture” (Stone-Mediatore 63). This promotion of a “civic culture” delineates the marginalized group within its own sense of social and ideological accord apart from that of the institutionalized culture. The aforementioned poem by Madingoane demonstrates the crafting of such communal ties through its call to action against Western incursions of African culture.

Such apartness, while welcome at first by the apartheid regime due to its mistaken assumption that it promoted black separation in the same sense as the Bantustans, was quickly acknowledged as problematic for the white population. Jimmy Kruger, Minister of Justice and the Police from 1974-9, noted this form of poetry as a threat and notified

Congress of its spreading impact (Brown 177). Such alarm from the government demonstrates the dramatic political impact such literary measures and the acquisition of knowledge they encouraged had upon the South African population. The derivation of such concern lay in the fact that, according to Lionel Abrahams, a South African writer, “poetry was an eternal stickler for the unwelcome ethical truth, confronting the gravest moral issues with all the vigilance that is implicit in the most responsible use of language” (Brown 179 quoting Watson). The similarities between the protest poet and the *imbongi* as social and political “whistle-blowers” are evident. In bringing to light the bleak reality of apartheid, protest poetry and the BCM threatened the supposed stability of the regime itself.

2.3 Barthes’ Origins

Barthes’ concept of origin, as one can glean from the epigraph at the start of this chapter, depends upon “a pure gesture... of expression” as he positions the written author’s “gesture of inscription” as one “without origin” or “at least, has no other origin than language itself” (148). Therefore, the author’s physical interpretation of the text (rather than inscribed interpretation) lends to an understanding of the text’s origin or original intentions. Further, this interpretation positions language as the entity that confuses origins and contrasts it against expression, which perhaps provides elucidation. The proximity of the oral author yields gestures such as facial expressions, body language, and tone, which substantiate the text with this expression Barthes claims is missing from the written text.

Before exploring what conclusions we can draw from expressive gestures, we must solidify more firmly our understanding of linguistic origins. To understand more

broadly the linguistic interpretation of origins, we turn to Russian linguist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin and his conception of *heteroglossia*. Heteroglossia as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “a diversity of voices, styles of discourse, or points of view in a literary work and especially a novel” (Merriam-Webster). Bakhtin’s conception expounds upon this definition in that it focuses on tensions between different forms and derivations of speech, in that each utterance (acts of speech or writing) is somehow dependent on other similar and dissimilar utterances: “Discourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context” (Bakhtin 490). It relies both on what is informing the utterance (such as contextual clues and origins) as well as derives its own meaning through what it is *not*. Therefore, a speech act cannot be original in its own right, because it is reliant and derived from such former, “alien” contexts. These utterances function as a part of a language, which is further located amongst many other languages, each functioning as “specific points of view on the world” (Bakhtin 494). This linguistic heritage is evident in the trajectory of South African orality; as archives of both the present era and the past, such poetry filters the human experience through the South African linguistic and experiential lens.

Bakhtin’s idea of heteroglossia is intended for the description of novels, though, and not poetry (much as Barthes’ essay is focused on writing, not orality). He believes that poetry is distinct from the novel and asserts that it does not function through this lens but is, in fact, *monoglossic* or *monologic*: “suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse... destroying all traces of social heteroglossia and diversity of language” (Ramazani “A Dialogic Poetics” 5). Social heteroglossia, for Bakhtin, is “where dialogic reverberations do not sound in the semantic

heights of discourse... but penetrate the deep strata of discourse, dialogize language itself” (Bakhtin 491). Poetry in a Bakhtinian sense is insular, unable to form connections or discourse between individuals. It is because of this limited nature that poetry does not engage in the heteroglossic interplay of language; it does not draw on what comes before or anticipate a response because it is simply an instance of linguistic arrangements – it is, then, not an “utterance” in the Bakhtinian sense because it does not directly anticipate a response.

Interestingly, though, Jahan Ramazani places postcolonial poems in a different subset from standard poetry through the Bakhtinian view. As its own “genre,” postcolonial poetry “instances the ‘artistic hybridization’ [Bakhtin] identifies with the novel” (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* 7). Through what he terms “organic hybrids,” postcolonial poems “unconsciously mix the ‘socio-linguistic... world views’ of colonizer and colonized” (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* 7). In part because of Ramazani’s delineation of postcolonial poetry as a separate genre from other, monoglossic forms of poetry, one can apply Bakhtin’s theories of heteroglossia in the study of South African poems. If Ramazani had not separated postcolonial poems from poetry more broadly, though, there still may be a case for oral poetry’s functioning within the heteroglossic sphere through the concept of social heteroglossia. As noted above, this concept is based off of deep-set mindsets and linguistic tendencies of communities more broadly. As a communal based, person-to-person, communicative transmissive mode, oral poetry functions to derive meanings through the previous origins and experiences of its listeners. On one level as fellow human beings and on a deeper level as fellow South Africans,

South African listeners of a performance of a poem from their own country will resonate and function within the regional dialogic references.

2.4 Conclusion

As we can gauge, oral modes of performance and artistic communication have been in place in South Africa long before the colonial incursion took place, and have endured through trying and bleak moments in the country's history. In fact, orality functioned as a means against Western or white influence (perhaps due to the entrenched literacy within Western cultures, as explored in the introductory chapter of this thesis) due to its unifying impacts and the difficulty to censor such modes of dissemination. Understanding the performance aspects of South African oral texts, as well as their religious and political histories, will serve us well as we move to explore how oral poetry functions in contemporary society. We will see that such unifying and communal modes are still very much in play, though the religious and political underpinnings have shifted and adapted to new social climates.

Chapter 3: Multi-Dimensionality

Understanding Origins and Influence in Contemporary South African Poetry

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning... but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. (Barthes 146)

With a foundational understanding of the origins of South African oral poetry, we may now move into an exploration of how such poetic tropes and intentions have influenced and still function within contemporary South African performances. This chapter moves to reveal the multi-modal aspects of this poetic era – reminiscent of the /Xam's "kukummi" – as well as its adaptations of religious, political, and social concerns. Though many historically relevant themes are still in play today, the poetic focus has shifted from the communal aims of the Zulu and apartheid eras to a more individualized, introspective form of poetry. The removal of geographical or cultural motivations from oral poetics has permitted a broader reception of the works, allowing contemporary poets to connect with individuals beyond their own ethnic, racial, and even national groups. This means that the influence of the poetry, as well as its response, enters into a new interpretive space in which a variety of influences and receptions "none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 146).

3.1 Contemporary South African Poetry

Today, spoken word poetry challenges the limits of its preceding eras. Building off of the concepts of community active in all phases of South African oral poetry and the strong emphasis on social change which arose upon the colonial invasion of Africa, contemporary spoken word poets seek to broaden these concerns from a specifically

South African basis to a more international scale through connecting to others as individuals instead of through racial or ethnic affiliations. While a broad range of styles comprises today's oral poetry, there is a "preference given to oral and performance poetry, especially amongst the younger, urbanized poets" (Pieterse 307). Through disseminative modes such as YouTube, radio, and performances such as the Word N Sound Series, young speakers have access to a wider stage and audience than their predecessors. Through these modes, poets utilize "a mix of languages or media" and, with this inclusion of technology, Annel Pieterse argues that these works are then able to "circumvent and disrupt the symbolic Law" of the poetic aesthetic and subvert "the dominance of established agents in the field of cultural production," namely that of the printing presses and commercialized media (Pieterse 307, 314). Interestingly, most active spoken word poets today are young, many born or raised after the end of the apartheid era – members of what South Africans refer to as the "born-free" generation. They have not experienced first-hand the traumas of apartheid and racial segregation, though many grew up in families impacted by the regime and profess that a strain of apartheid-like conditions still exists today; it is this ugly underbelly of society that many current poets seek to expose.

The main mode of performance at this juncture would be "slams" or "poetry sessions" in which multiple poets present their works to a larger audience, often with a sort of ranking or reward system in play. Noel Kabelo Ringane, known in the spoken word poetry circuit as KB Kilobyte, locates this tradition back to American contemporary poetic and rap culture, citing such performance venues as means to express protest and to challenge society without saying it directly to the leadership. Typically, these

performances are comprised chiefly of black poets, though are certainly not limited to such (Ringane Web Interview).

While many poets are active today in the spoken word poetry scene due to “the hype” as 1990s poet Lefifi Tladi proclaims, many participate in its practice as an outlet for personal experiences and emotions which further serve to connect people on an individual (instead of the formerly communal or mass) basis (Monnakgotla). This subsection will spotlight KB Kilobyte, Mpho Khosi, Mutle Mothibe, and Siza Nkosi most closely; this strong focus is due not only to these poets’ involvement in the range of modes of preservation this inquiry focuses on (YouTube, radio, and performances such as Word N Sound which will all be examined within Chapter 4), but also to their willingness to take part in the investigatory stages of this project by participating in live and e-mail interviews. These interviews provide a more intimate window into the lives and motivations of these artists than exist for many other prominent poets of the day, which is critically important, especially in the efforts of gauging the interiority of the poems themselves.

These poets began writing for a variety of reasons, many of whom were not initially concerned with social issues at all, using poetry instead as a manner of expression of more personal emotions or to create broader social connections. For Mpho Khosi, poetry functions as a means of finding his voice. As an “introvert[ed]... child,” Khosi “never spoke much” and found poetry as a way “to speak of things that people usually see; but don’t take note of” [*sic*] (Khosi Interview). For Siza Nkosi, her poetic talent lied dormant until a moment of grave sadness:

I met poetry at my sister's funeral. I had written my feelings at the back of the funeral program and a guy by the name of Abdul Milazi, read it and thought there's a poet in my writing, so that's how poetry found me. [*sic*]
(Nkosi Interview)

KB Kilobyte's inspiration was more multi-national. His inability to learn English in school prompted him to read, watch TV, and listen to radio in the language. He says of his poetry:

What started as a mimic turned out to be a talent and I ran with it. In the process, my English improved, I was becoming more aware of everything and filling up shows, travelling countries and signing autographs.
(Ringane Web Interview)

Contemporary poetry sprouts through many motivations, though ones much less decisively political than those of oral poets in the past.

Of course, over time such poets develop varying styles and approaches to their poetry, though perhaps in a more individualized and introspective manner than their predecessors both in style and in concern. Siza Nkosi explains her shift from "very long, free style pieces" to "shorter, more structured verses" (Nkosi Interview). Typically, at least in a performance setting, a free-style approach mirrors conversation more closely, which allows for a greater degree of inter-personal connection and unity. Turning to more systematized structures moves away from the inherently African tradition of poetry as a mode of storytelling and toward a more Westernized conception of the genre. Nkosi explains that she intends for these shorter verses to be published in a collection of poems, which furthers the increased interiority of more contemporary poems, as written texts

foster a sense of isolation and introspection. Such a shift hearkens back quite literally to Barthes' own conceptions of origins within writing, which will be explored later in the chapter.

Clearly, though, not all poets have veered so far from typical oral poetry as to publish on the page, yet many still demonstrate shifts inward through their poetic concerns. Mutle Mothibe explains that, as a kid, he began writing in order to deal with

everything from racism from some of the white kids i attended school with, family issues... in high-school i was heavily political and a bit religious and my current artworks reflect where i am at any given moment... whether celebrating my life or expressing confusion and frustrations i have with social inequalities. [*sic*] (Mothibe Interview)

While it can be seen through the case studies of indigenous and apartheid era oral poetics, such poems tend to focus on communal and political issues and relegate personal experiences to the periphery or into oblivion entirely. Mothibe's admission that he writes about "wherever i am at any given moment" illustrates a shift away from more collective concerns toward individualized, personal experiences.

Some earlier poets from the "protest poetry" movement, which occurred during and in the years immediately following apartheid, do not agree with this branching off from poetic tradition. Lefifi Tladi, a musician, visual artist, teacher, and former protest poet, expresses his frustrations with this new era of oral poetry: "today's youth have no centre that holds them together... They have no ideology... Their poems have no focus and bring in personal elements" (Monnakgotla). This Yeatsian attestation paradoxically cites that an inward movement brings the speakers further from a central point. His

statement clearly acknowledges this inward shift toward a focus on the individual in contemporary poetry, though frames it negatively. Tladi's linkage between this element and a lack of focus is of note— it connotes that oral poetry, without broad social and political aims, is somehow less legitimate or effectual. In this sense, the “centre” would be located outside of the self, within the collectivity of ones people. For him, the meaningful poem is one that takes “courage and knowledge.” He explains, “We didn't just become poets. We read a lot and our knowledge about Afro-centric poetry was very profound. We wrote from an informed point of view” (Monnakgotla). This perspective aligns closely (though through a different contextual lens) with American poets of the modernist era such as Pound and Eliot, who proffered intellectual knowledge of the past as a critical component of artistic culture. Tladi's perspective that poetry must maintain a central ideology is not necessarily valid – over time many genres of poetry have existed as “art for art's sake” – though throughout the history of South African oral poetry there has developed a pointed social and political aim until the blurring we now see in the contemporary period.

This shift is not necessarily bad, and now that young South Africans do not have a finite regime they are fighting against, – such as apartheid – forcing them to rally their counterparts, they are able to reflect and share more internal musings. Mothibe, also interviewed in the Monnakgotla article, explains that while he finds inspiration in protest poetry, he “nevertheless questions its effectiveness,” explaining, “My gripe is that we write poetry and picket, but what does that achieve at the end of the day? OK, I get on stage and speak out against something, but how does that help an individual?” (Monnakgotla). His focus is still on the connection between people, but on an individual

rather than a necessarily communal level, connecting through shared human encounters and experiences. He expresses similar frustrations toward contemporary protest poets, noting that they have become “self-centered and individual-based” (Monnakgotla). Mothibe brings up an important point about internally focused poetry: understanding oral text on a micro-level is beneficial if and only if it is fostering a connection between people. Poetry that is *too* “self-centered” will do nothing to propagate what Maakomele ‘Mak’ Manaka, another contemporary poet and son of an apartheid-era protest poet, cites as “the articulation of the human condition” which should lie at the center of poetic motivation (Monnakgotla).

Based on the interviews with the poets, though their works stem from personal experiences, they still reflect South African society both through their own eyes, and, inadvertently, through their connection to a broader audience of individuals. Mothibe explains that he writes “for myself and people seem to find their lives reflected in my artworks,” elaborating that even though “i don’t write for people... i have had feed back from people who felt i touched and reflected their lives” [*sic*] (Mothibe Interview). The internally focused aims still hold resonance within external individuals, not entirely through political motivations or shared social experiences as in previous eras (though these exist to some extent), but through intimate, personal experiences such as “wanting love, losing love and being in love... life in general” (Khosi Interview). Nkosi espouses similar sentiments, noting

I used to think that I’m writing for myself... But people go through the same things in this life and we live in one world really, so everyone seems to relate. I however write to heal because I cannot keep things to myself.

Most of my work is from personal experiences and to just share my madness. [*sic*] (Nkosi Interview)

It is due to the commonalities between the everyday existences of individuals that a poem intended for oneself resonates within a wider audience of individuals. While former modes of oral poetry aimed at cultural or racially specific audiences, the poetry of today aims at individuals more broadly; it does not matter who you are or where you come from, as long as you've had similar, human experiences to the poet.

Siza Nkosi's poem "Trapped Between the Bible and the Constitution" elucidates her maternal fears for her daughter growing up in contemporary society. While the poem can, at first, easily be attributed to South African social shortcomings, the piece represents issues felt by women across the globe. Malika Ndlovu, a radio host on the Badilisha Poetry X-change explains that Nkosi's piece expresses

the breadth of sadly familiar issues of gender based violence, rights violation, oppression, scenarios all too common in South African society as well as all over the world, where patriarchy is imbedded in the structure of society and unacceptable prejudices against women have become a norm. (Badilisha, "Siza Nkosi")

The recording opens with Nkosi playing guitar and singing the refrain of the poem:

I am a mother

Trapped between the bible

and the constitution

These Jurisdictions do nothing

for my children's education (Nkosi, "Trapped Between")

The musical foray into the text creates a unified, intimate, and even soothing feeling. This softening of such potentially painful issues allows for the “opening up [of] space for your own interpretation and understanding of her intentions for referencing the Bible and the Constitution as these so-called pillars of society and morality” (Badilisha, “Siza Nkosi”). The image of a trapped mother, especially within a space between two supposedly principled entities, is disconcerting. It connotes that within a society in which politics and religion are touted so prominently, there is no longer space for a prominent insertion of family values.

Nkosi reminisces her own youthful past and notes the differences her daughter will face growing up:

The space between her room
and cell phone
Isn't enough for her childhood
She'll never get to have the
world in her palms
Watch it twirl the way it did
when we used to play itopo
She'll never get to create glue
made of grass and sunlight just
for fun
Or tuck her skirts in her panties
without giving ideas of rape (Nkosi, “Trapped Between”)

The image of a child consumed not by nature, but by their cellphone or other forms of technology is certainly an image virtually any 21st century parent can recognize, whether African or not. This technologically bound existence, which does not provide “enough for her childhood,” hearkens to a sense of loss within contemporary youth more broadly. Technology, for Nkosi, poses sexual threats for her child as well. While Nkosi works, she leaves her daughter “in the supervision / of the media” which teaches the daughter that

Fashion plays sexy dress up

...

As if prostituting her worth to

men with unmanaged

hormones (Nkosi, “Trapped Between”)

The social expectations for women, which in this instance include female objectification, foretell a bleak future for feminine youth. As a mother, Nkosi seems to sense a loss of influence over her daughter which is replaced by male desires. In this society which is supposed to promulgate Christian ethical values and constitutional justice, the female figure is still “a second / class citizen,” thereby deeming these moral pillars to be untenable, or perhaps even promoting hidden values of equality (Nkosi, “Trapped Between”).

While of course gender relations are still a cause of distress within the South African social context, they are furthermore a concern for women across the globe. The United Nations reports that “1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence – mostly by an intimate partner” and, further, that only 2/3 countries worldwide have outlawed domestic violence (UN Women). Beyond this, issues of sexual

servitude, genital mutilation, and child marriage are concerns in many parts of the globe. While, of course, Nkosi does not refer to all of these issues directly in her poem, it is clear that a broad spectrum of women (and even men) can relate to the sentiment of this work regardless of their racial or geographic connections. The poem, then, proliferates an individual experience or perspective throughout a broader audience of individuals able to connect through their human experiences rather than through perceived allegiances or targeted audiences. This poem, while still acknowledging social ills, moves beyond a South African or protest context to reach this broad, potentially international audience. Its usage both of multiple modes (i.e. speech, guitar) as well as its broad reach beyond the immediate begins to elucidate Barthes' conceptions of multi-dimensionality, which we will explore in more depth shortly.

Interestingly, KB Kilobyte takes a markedly different approach to his poetry than his counterparts. When asked who his poetry was written for, he responded, "I rarely write for myself, I write more for the youth than the elderly," citing the aims of today's poetry as "real, reflects our current state of life and shies away from utopian fantasies. It is brave and tackles issues that some might not want to admit" (Ringane Email Interview). Often, his poetry tackles political issues, perhaps to a greater extent than his counterparts. Harkening back to the Monnakgotla article, there seems to be a divide between modern-day "protest poets" and those who speak on a more individualized, less politicized level.

Regardless of the imperative approaches of the art, poets still seem to encapsulate the South African experience, which, nevertheless, includes the residues of apartheid. KB Kilobyte explains:

Apartheid has left many scars on a lot of people. My family was directly affected by it and I know of grown men that cry even when recalling some of the events like it was yesterday. Its ripple effects [still] resonate today. Having heard these stories, I have written some poems based around that era. Any bits and pieces of history have puzzled up the present and future, thus renders everything of the past relevant. Apartheid was an era, but racism still plagues our streets and poetry has to (unfortunately) speak the uncomfortable truth. [*sic*] (Ringane Email Interview)

As noted above, while apartheid has formally ended, its ideologies and central tenets still pervade the South African existence. Whether a poet aims to write directly about these issues or simply about their individualized life experiences, apartheid's legacy is likely to creep up in the poems. Nkosi, Mothibe, and Khosi, all writers who claim to write for themselves instead of for the achievement of broader political aims, still note the prevalence of apartheid-era themes in their works as well as in the context of their performances. Mothibe attributes some of his poetic themes to the "staunch patriarchal mindset" of South Africa and notes how the story of his father's experiences being tortured during apartheid left "a bit of hardening... in me" (Mothibe Interview). Khosi's poems are "influenced by South African issues" and "based on the lives of South Africans. [This] is influenced by their joys, sorrows, struggles and triumphs" (Khosi Interview). Nkosi, who was born at the tail end of apartheid, notes that while she was "a victim of it," she has also realized "that my daughter is still a victim, 20 years later" (Nkosi Interview). The remnants of apartheid are clearly alive and well, and while the regime has formally ended, it seems (at least in Nkosi's view) to have serious

repercussions even on the born-free generation: “Apartheid still exists; you see it in the media, in the corporate world and everywhere else” (Nkosi Interview).

KB Kilobyte’s poem “Joburg Let My People Go” espouses poetic frustrations with society as it pertains to apartheid’s remnants. The poet figures himself as Moses in the biblical scene in which the prophet returns to Egypt to reclaim the Israelites from Pharaoh’s rule. He begs, “Joburg Joburg let me people go, / I have come for my father’s prodigal sons the silent ones,” positioning himself as a savior for his people – Africans with indigenous heritages, or perhaps simply Africans who did not benefit after the fall of apartheid – against the tyranny of the social and political conditions in Johannesburg (*Joburg*). He compares the city itself to the individuals who suffer in its conditions: “‘Joburg Hustle-burg’ they say as you snatch another soul, / Meanwhile Joe hustles bags trying to salvage the dreams you stole” (*Joburg*). Despite the end of the apartheid regime, the state itself (no longer the government, but now the culture of the city) seeks to usurp power and even dignity from its residents. Joe, presumably an average, hardworking constituent, must toil simply to undo the damage Johannesburg has perpetrated upon him. In sum, he is unable to move forward, he is perpetually at a disadvantage. He further pleads:

Joburg let my people go

The millions that make you billions are shackles in shackles,

I have come to return the human in blacks,

They continue to feed the mouth that bites them,

And lament fragments of the truth that secludes them, (*Joburg*)

This is the first point in the poem, though it is about halfway through, that KB Kilobyte makes reference to detriment arising from race. Though his racial counterparts have

“become slaves of your dreams,” the poet aims to “return the human in blacks” which perhaps aims to remind this oppressive system of the humanity in all people, notably black people. While such people do love their country and their city – “Joburg we love to love you,” KB Kilobyte struggles to reconcile how to “love Love that loves me not?” (*Joburg*). The poem exemplifies how political and social concerns can still function in contemporary poetry and how, sometimes, poets do still appeal to racial, ethnic, or geographic groups instead of the more common individualized aims as seen in Nkosi’s work.

Not only does the role of apartheid impact the positioning of these poets, which we see reinforces a subliminal (or more conscious) sense of influence within their poems and their concerns, but also within their performances. There is a fear of racist responses and a misalignment of values between members of different racial groupings, a legacy clearly resonant of the apartheid era. Nkosi, as a black woman, explains her experience performing for a white crowd:

I went to one session hosted by a white friend of mine, and I didn’t know what to perform because everyone in the audience was white. See what I mean? I couldn’t believe that there are still places like that. I was lucky that we are all (all races) against the government [and] my white audience liked my work. (Nkosi Interview)

While this instance does not demonstrate a fissure between black and white individuals, Nkosi’s anxieties toward the performance are telling. This latent perception of topics that may be acceptable to one racial makeup and not another seems to connote a sense of racial separatism within society; that perhaps, black positions and opinions would not be

understood or appreciated by a white crowd. Nkosi explains that her poem related to dissatisfaction toward the government; its positive reception by a white audience signifies at least a sector of the white populous that agrees with black stances (or that, perhaps, the poem related to frustrations beyond race that impact on an *individual* level instead of a cultural or ethnic impact as the poems of the past).

While this contemporary era of poetry seems to depart from its predecessors in terms of audience and aims (/Xam and Zulu focusing on cultural connections while apartheid era focuses on ethnic and racial origins), it is not entirely disconnected from the essence of these former movements. Notably, the poetry still possesses the same magnitude of emotional connection. Mothibe explains his role in crafting the emotional responses of individuals through oral poetry:

i think in performing the pieces you get to control and direct how you want [the poem] to be received. Well ultimately the audience will relate to parts they resonate with and walk away with different stories but one tries to carry through their own voice and energy. In performing i have also come to love the audience reception... connecting with people and somewhat controlling their moods like a conductor. With written works its like throwing poems into a river and never seeing the effects they have... never really seeing the ripple effect. i guess one wants the immediate update on how people receive your work. [*sic*] (Mothibe Interview)

The emotional connection is, in part, mediated through this person-to-person contact that only performance poetry can provide. The poet's role at the fore of the crowd, as Mothibe demonstrates, allows the speaker to "conduct" the emotions of the audience with their

words by painting empathetic scenarios through poetic imagery. The emotional response is immediate; the speaker directly witnesses the audience's reaction to the words and knows if the poem achieved the desired effect upon the listeners. This immediate hermeneutic connection likely informs the speaker as well, as he can shift his presentation to better achieve his desired ends, and even develop a more profound emotional reaction to the poem itself. Nkosi explains that, though she had performed such poem previously, she “cried once on stage. I feel that one poem sounds different everytime one reads it” [*sic*] (Nkosi Interview). The varying contexts of the performances evoke new meanings within the poems, and create fresh perspectives on behalf of the performers themselves. This shared emotional reaction to language is part of what makes oral poetry not only powerful today, but throughout the genre's history.

Further, the incorporation of multi-media integrations into the performances hearken back to indigenous conceptions of performance and markedly differ South African sessions from Western ones. Catherine Labiran, a British-Nigerian student at Emory University, explains her experiences performing her own poetry within South Africa. She noted a more theatrical approach than in slams of the West, in which performers could wear costumes, dance, and move about the stage, citing this as a “more progressive approach” than those she had been exposed to before (Labiran Interview). Further, “Some artists used paint to create pictures on stage. Some had paint on their faces. Some put water on themselves. It allowed [the] audience to [visualize] what they were talking about” (Labiran Interview). Such broad incorporations hearken back to the /Xam ideas of “kukummi” – a term which refers collectively to poetry, drama, dance, and other performative modes. Because, as Labiran explains, Western performance venues

proffer time limits and a disallowance of visual and artistic accompaniments in performances, such broad perspective of poetry seems to be a decidedly African one.

3.2 Analyzing the Poetic Trajectory Through Barthes' Lens

For Barthes, the written text is unavoidably and inherently a compilation of that which came before; not stagnant within a singular genre, but drawing on exposure to such modes of transmission as “dialogue, parody, contestation” (Barthes 148). The author, then, cannot remove himself from a larger frame of reference and influence; his work is not original, rather a development upon previous textual (and non-textual) productions. He explains, “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning... but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes 146). Remember, Barthes’ concern lies solely within the realm of inscription, denying oral textuality the same degree of legitimacy as writing. In this subchapter, oral authors will be revealed as similar to Barthes’ inscribed author in the sense of purporting a “multi-dimensional” development over time despite his assertion of their differences. As demonstrated through the previous subchapter, there are various tactics and styles of oral poetry that have endured in the South African textual corpus. Stretching back to the indigenous era, the encompassing idea of “kukummi,” the infusion of Christian and Westernized values, the communal aspect, and the political role of the poet have remained central tenets of South African oral poetry, though they have evolved over time.

Aside from such underlying themes and motives, oral poets may directly reference their predecessors or themes in order to emphasize this evolutionary tendency, not only within poetry, but also within society. One of the most famous South African

oral poets, Lesego Rampolokeng, performing (and writing) both at the tail end of apartheid as well as during the immediate post-apartheid era, demonstrates this immediate discourse between predecessors through his poem “To Gil Scott-Heron.” The title itself makes this discursive reference clear through its directive toward the American soul and jazz poet/musician. Such cross-cultural references supports Barthes’ claim that texts are made up of “multiple writings, drawn from many cultures” (Barthes 148). Beyond African history, American history (through its similar racial struggles) poses influentially in Rampolokeng’s work. The poem acts in direct response to Scott-Heron’s performance of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” which, formally presented as a song, functions at the intersection between poetry and song (much as the /Xam conception of “kukummi” allows for) and demands action for the aforesaid “revolution.” Scott-Heron asserts that “You will not be able to stay home, brother / ... / Because the revolution will not be televised” but rather “The revolution will be live” (Scott-Heron). Rampolokeng subverts this cry, asserting “gil scott-heron the revolution is on television” in order to elucidate the bastardization and pacification of the contemporary black man’s struggle (Rampolokeng 51). In addition to direct references to Scott-Heron, Rampolokeng speaks of art’s role to “fight / for immunisation against the degeneration / of garvey’s children & the spawn of fanon” (Rampolokeng 51).⁹ The reference to these two prominent black (though not geographically “African”) men further demonstrates the awareness of a broader historical context than simply South Africa or the poem as a singular entity.

⁹ Marcus Garvey (1897-1940) was a Jamaican political leader as well as a supporter of the Black Nationalism and the Pan-Africanism movements. Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) was an Afro-Caribbean philosopher and writer.

Further than simply acknowledging this cross-cultural connection, Rampolokeng draws (whether consciously or subconsciously I am unsure) connections between his own style and that of the Xhosa people. Think back to Scheub's diagram of the traditional praise poem in Chapter 2. In the formulaic progression of sounds, the *imbongi* utilizes both "major explosion[s] of sound" and "expansible low-noted chant[s]" (Scheub 480). Though Rampolokeng disseminates his work both on paper and through performance, his written texts (which serve to elucidate his words most clearly) offer strong indications of the performative interpretation through his delineation of language visually. Throughout the poem, Rampolokeng employs fully capitalized phrases, which create an ironically silent effect of yelling. Beginning his poem with the shock-inducing phrase "RUN NIGGER RUN" visually aligns with the opening explosive oratory of the Xhosa *izibongo*, which Scheub signifies with the notation ** (Rampolokeng 51). For the Xhosa, the end of the lines "glide downwards to the predominantly lower note" which can be seen both in Rampolokeng's aversion to having capitalized letters at the end of his lines – even going so far as to end one verse with the phrase "FAMILY STONEd"¹⁰ – he ends the poem itself with the seemingly quiet, defeated phrase "switch off that shit" (Rampolokeng 51, 52). Instead of his capitalized, fighting words, the poem ends with this small, un-capitalized, frustrated line. While his anger is still clear, it is not wrought with the flaming yells implicit in his capitalized rants, therefore aligning with the closing, quieter features of the Xhosa *izibongo*.

Aside from Rampolokeng, the trajectories of the multi-media, communal, and political (or individualized) roles of the poet have hopefully become elucidated and have

¹⁰ While this visual-linguistic choice likely derived from the pun on the "family stone" as a valued artifact and the act of being "stoned" as a distortion of this tradition, it further serves to follow the theme of verses ending with emphasized notations.

been furthered through the examination of Rampolokeng's "To Gil Scot-Heron." Because of Rampolokeng's place as both an apartheid and post-apartheid poet, his poetic perspective is valuable within this long, linear examination of oral poetic development over time, as he embodies facets of two eras at once. His poem "Visions of Salvation" serves to demonstrate the religious influences that have been resonant since the Zulu adaptations of religion within their own poetry (Rampolokeng 31). The piece frames the Christian conception of salvation through a bastardized lens that seems both to critique the religious foundations themselves as well as the deterioration of society more broadly. Looking back at the examination of the Zulu movement toward Christianity, the optical similarities are striking. Rampolokeng's couplet's visually mirror Isaiah Shembe's hymnal structure of "Hymn 45." Though Rampolokeng's stanzas are shorter (standing at only two lines while Shembe's were four, perhaps, then, more suggestive of a Christian psalm), the delineated, digestible segmentations of poetics are clearly reminiscent of biblical text.

Further, Zulu poems both encapsulate Christian values while demonstrating the sometimes-disastrous impacts of the West on African culture. Rampolokeng, too, demonstrates this deterioration of culture, as well as his less than enthusiastic opinions of Christianity. For Rampolokeng, the ascription to Christianity leads to a world with "no thinkers" and instead, individuals passively "slurp[ing]" – ingesting, being fed – diseased ideas (Rampolokeng 31). Shembe's hope to overcome the disgrace brought to the Zulu people is compounded and insurmountable in Rampolokeng's 1990s poem. Because Rampolokeng so rarely employs poetic form in such a way, his choice to do so in a poem criticizing Christianity and salvation arouses questions of its biblical connotations. It

would be within the realm of reason and probability that forms such as Shembe's influenced Rampolokeng for this work. While it is unlikely that Rampolokeng has read, specifically, "Hymn 45," the relevance of African history, which Tladi emphasized as being so important to the protest poets, surely would have been within the poet's realm of consciousness. The above examples of Rampolokeng's works demonstrate the dialogic principles of influence and derived meaning that are so critical to Bakhtin's heteroglossic works, which were discussed in Chapter 2.

One can better understand Barthes' conceptions of the multi-cultural and the sense of "mutual relations" within the text through this Bakhtinian approach. His conception of "multi-dimensional[ity]" is also intriguing within the context of oral performance poetry. Barthes explains that a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes 146). In a literal sense, Barthes is referring to the dimensionality of contexts: that a text pulls not only from its author's experiences and ideas, but also gains legitimacy in meaning as a piece of a larger corpus of similar works. Writing – the literal act of it – is an attempt to create significance within a two-dimensional space through the creation of characters from which both the writer and reader derive the same meaning. Orality, though, gives shape and experience to such characters, and functions within a three-dimensional space; the author is physically in front of the receiver, and has spatial range of movement as well as oral autonomy. In terms of origins, it may be much more difficult to discern external influences within the performed poem due to the inability to scrutinize the lyrics as one could on a page. The heteroglossic links would become most apparent in the mode of delivery, as Rampolokeng's capitalized rants in "To Gil Scott-Heron" mirrored the Xhosa

izibongo style. With the author in front of the audience, it is also much more difficult to imagine him or her as dissolved within a larger, heteroglossic corpus of texts as one could with Barthes' "dead" author. Without the author's physical presence, it may be easier for a reader to root their ideas and sentiments within those of their predecessors, but with the genuine emotion of a speaker face-to-face, it may be more difficult to belittle these textual moves as simply those of a predecessor and wholly unoriginal.

Of course, other writers and cultural experiences influence every text. Every poet interviewed professed such inspirations from other performers as the impetus for their own artistic endeavors. Origins are a complex concept within the text, as Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia is present in all texts and therefore the ability to map or understand original influences is wholly unachievable. While oral poets function in a different mode than written poets, their works are equally susceptible to the complex web of textual incursions that any other text would be, though the listeners' reception of such may be complicated in new ways due to the detachment from the physical form of the text.

3.3 Conclusion

Now with a broad understanding of South African poetic history, its origins, and some theoretical underpinnings of the concept of textual origins, hopefully Barthes' essay seems more relevant to the reading and understanding of South African oral poetry.

Tracing poetic tactics through the ages, one can see the developments of the communal, political, religious, and multi-media aspects of the art form. Because these have stood the test of time, one can argue that their interpretation and preservation within contemporary poems functions as a mode of heteroglossic inclusion, as preceding modes of orality

inform and guide current works. In this sense, Barthes is correct in saying that “the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original;” that essentially nothing is new or inventive but inspired through the lens of what comes prior (Barthes 146). In essence, the oral South African poet exists within the same heteroglossic restraints as any other mode of author, though these may be impacted and even obscured through their physical presence in the delivery of the text itself.

Chapter 4: Audience Receptivity

Locating Notions of Authorial Influence & Audience Interpretation Through Varying Modes of Transmission and Preservation

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.

Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted.

(Barthes 148)

And so we arrive at the crux of Barthes' argument: the (written) author's death comes with the privileging of the reader as the locus of action. While the author creates the physicality of the text, the reader is what gives it vivacity and resonance. Without a reader, the text itself would be "dead" along with its inscriber. The reader is the external force that breathes life into this stagnant text through his application of his own perspectives and interpretations of its meanings as well as his ability to "[hold] together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted" (Barthes 148). While the mapping and delineation of the *entirety* of the textual origins and influences of South African oral poetry is quite nearly impossible, the essence of these factors survives within the recipient of the text as the "single field" which holds the "traces" of the texts themselves. Interestingly, though, while the text has deep-set origins and influences, Barthes' reader has none: "the reader is without history, biography, psychology" (Barthes 148). In this sense, it does not matter *who* is reading the text or *who* the text is intended for; each reader brings his or her own interpretations to their reading, and this conceptual understanding of the text becomes "true" in a sense. The vivacity the text carries in actuality weighs more heavily on its meaning than the authorial intentions from its outset.

This chapter demonstrates how different modes of textual dissemination impact the listeners' receptions of oral poetry and how such influence aligns with Barthes' conception of the literary reader. Of course, listeners' emotional reactions to oral poetry breathe life into the poem (though this life is already there, to an extent, due to the authorial voice being the chief mode of dissemination). The listener is still the locus of remembrance for and effect of the poem, not the poet him or herself, as in Barthes' conception. The oral poetic transmission is part of a broader hermeneutic process than written works, as the poet and listener are, in a performance setting, in each other's immediate presence; due to this fact, the speaker and recipient may each function as both the locus and recipient of the text. The speaker both recites the poem and feeds off the audience's energy, while the recipients receive the text from the author but transmit responses (at least in a live setting) that influence the author's delivery of the text. In this sense, the oral poet differs from Barthes' written author.

The subsequent subchapters will examine varying modes of oral poetic dissemination – live performance, YouTube, and radio – and analyze how these experiences (with their differences in speaker-audience proximity) impact the interpretive relationship between the speaker and recipient of the text. Ultimately, the live performance ensures a movement beyond the Barthesian author-reader relationship due to the complex hermeneutic relationship between the speaker and audience, though YouTube and radio or podcasts streams mirror this theoretical conception by substantiating this authorial distancing.

4.1 Live Performances

Of course, oral poetry is intended, first and foremost, to be experienced live. As an overarching sentiment, this format serves to provide a greater depth of emotion and communality than other, more mediated forms of presentation, such as those through electronic means. The poem's "breaking" of silence within a performance space is a metaphorical action representative of rupturing not only the silences toward social and societal norms, but also the unspoken racial and economic divisions within South Africa. Ultimately, it is the immediate physicality of the performer that gives oral poetry the power to create awareness and unity in a more substantive manner than many other forms of poetic dissemination.

Often, in South African "slams" and other modes of live presentation, the poets can accompany their works with lights, dance, movement, and costume. KB Kilobyte's performance of "Joburg Let My People Go" at the Word N Sound Experience included sound effects of thunder rolling in the background, which serve to heighten the intensity and the authority with which the poet spoke (*Joburg*). Additionally, they hearken back to the /Xam conceptions of "kukummi" in which poetry and other art forms are considered one in the same. Such inclusions function in stark contrast to Western poetry slams, which often involve a fixed time limit and disallow such accompaniments (Labiran Interview). The embellishments in the South African "slams" and performances date back to indigenous /Xam and Zulu modes of oral presentation, claiming a sense of Africanness within this American-born tradition.

The live oral performance is the space in which the speaker-recipient hermeneutics function most strongly. In terms of Barthes, this would be the locus in

which the viewer of the performance can function most similarly to his conception of the reader of inscribed text; that is as a physical culmination of the intricacies and resonances of the text itself. When this effect is strong, it has the power to infect the listener with a strong passion (or perhaps revulsion) toward the text. In oral poetry, the experience impresses upon the listener various emotions and dredges up former memories; it is through these experiences that the listener fosters a connection (or loathing) toward the textual work itself. The live performance venue is the most Barthesian of disseminative modes; it serves to heighten the speaker-listener relationship not only as Barthes imagines, but even more profoundly.

Due to the “sparsely documented” nature of spoken word poetry and the fact that it is “hardly connected beyond national boundaries,” this chapter will focus on performance venues that are both easily accessible through the web and, additionally, unique in their endeavors: The Spoken Word Project and the Word N Sound Live Literature Company (The Spoken Word Project, Web). The first of these is a sort of spoken word game of “Telephone” in which poets record their performances and send the clips to poets in another African country, by which these international poets respond and form their own poems based on the themes present in the initial, South African poem. The poems are then passed to a third country, and so on. The Word N Sound Live Literature Company describes itself as “a platform for the expression of spoken word, not so much a commercial venture as an attempt to make a positive impact on youth in the city” in the hopes that the program will “encourage and inspire them and... give them a sense of the trajectory of a literary career” (Word N Sound Live Literature Co., Web). The Spoken Word project envisions the dual role of both speaker and receptor as the

locus and recipient of textual creation, while The Word N Sound Live Literature Company fosters a sense of resonance within listeners so that poetry will not only live on through their interpretations and impressions, but that they may too, one day, contribute as a producer of such texts.

The Spoken Word Project is a recent intervention into the spoken word poetry scene, breaking standard norms of “community” by widening the term to encompass a Pan-African tone. The project opens its website with the words:

Stories are created by being told. In telling narratives, stories are invented, passed on, changed and adapted. They wander through the world, are passed from person to person and easily transcend boundaries... Stories contribute to the creation of a common identity and sense of belonging.

(The Spoken Word Project, Web)

The interpretive basis of this project – realized through the conflation of the audience and speaker roles in the passage of poetry to other (responsive) poets –not only creates a unity between counterparts, but reenacts and brings to life the true storytelling action itself. The project hosts performances in each city, and the selected winner has the opportunity to perform in the subsequent city; the rest of the performers have recorded versions of their poems that can be passed forward and are featured on the project’s website. The poem, as a story, does not and cannot stop at its origin, but continues on through the mouths of its recipients; this is the literal realization of Barthes’ locus of the poem within its recipients and furthers the conception of the hermeneutic speaker-recipient relationship.

The initiative connects not only a South African textual community, but also any individual willing to take part in the interpretive process. Siza Nkosi performed with this project, and elaborates on the experience as follows:

I loved the Spoken word project [*sic*] because it allowed us to share our different cultures... With my performance, I wanted to share South African realities and also see if people go through or experience what we go through the same way we do and guess what? We are the same, everywhere in the world. We hurt the same and dream the same. All we have to do is just love and enjoy our differences. (Nkosi Interview)

The unifying impacts of the experience are starkly apparent in this summation. The program fosters an inter-cultural connection that serves to broaden this dialectic relationship beyond South African borders. Such networks hearken back to Barthes' conceptions of origins and, perhaps, serve as a basis for new poetic incursions within the South African oral corpus. In this sense, the role of the speaker/receptor is further complicated, as each participant is literally functioning within both positions; while the poet presents his poem in performance, he then passes on his poem (through video) to a receptor, who then literally takes on the role of the speaker in his response poem. Each agent possesses the power to influence and act upon the works of the other, though through a slightly decelerated process. The complex passage of poetry across the continent is elucidated in the following image:

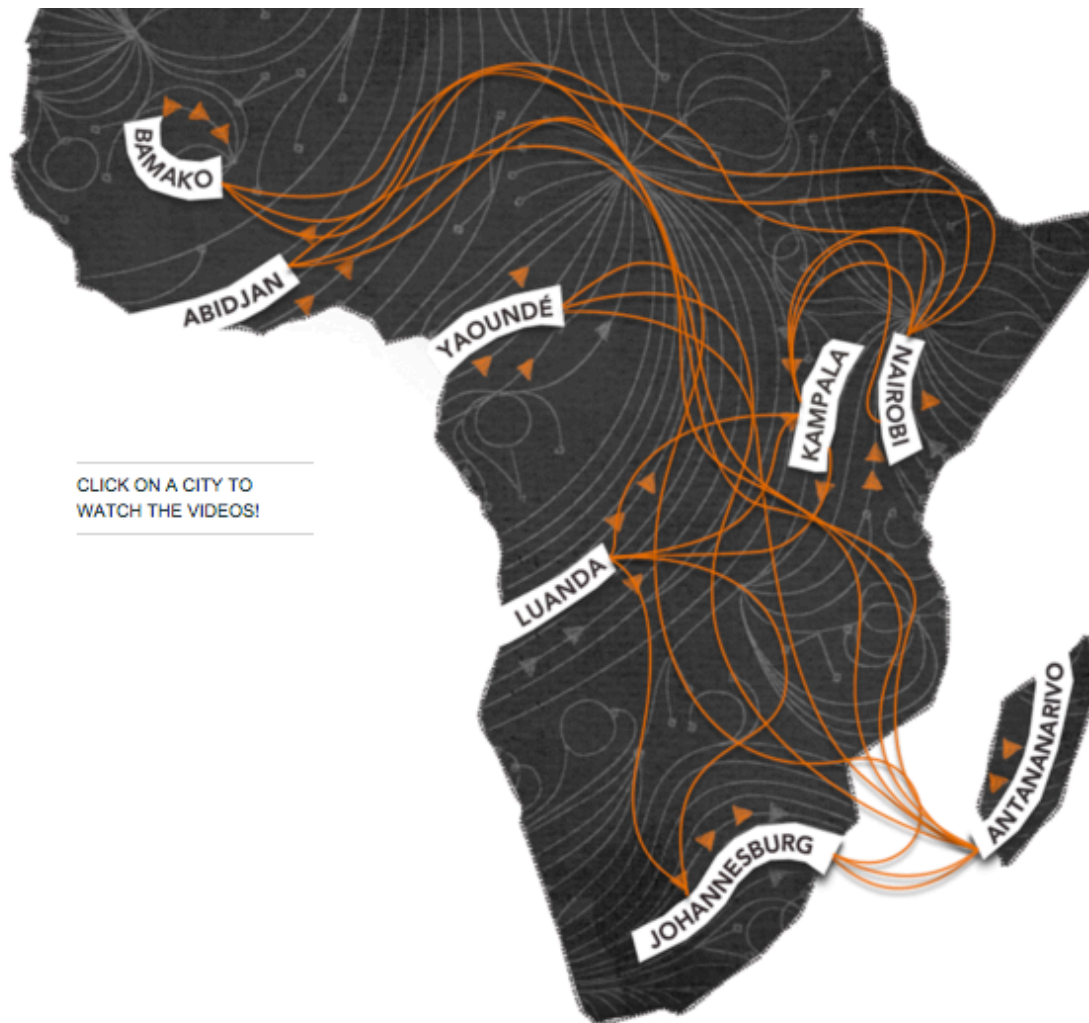


Image 1: "Map of Africa" *The Spoken Word Project: Stories Traveling Through Africa*

As the image conveys, this passage between nations is not singularly directed, but rather proliferates throughout the continent in a multitude of directions. Of course, these poems are recorded during a live performance within their home cities, so this project serves the dual purpose of live and video-recorded modes of dissemination. The performances sustain varying impacts in each city, as the role of orality differs in each country. While

spoken word poetry in South Africa is prominent due to its central function within the anti-apartheid movement, Youssouf Doumbia, a Malian culture journalist, explains, “Spoken word as such is not a well-known concept in our part of the world,” yet The Spoken Word Project travels to places like Bamako, Mali as well (Doumbia). This incursion into the artistic “scene” of other African countries not only creates an alternative forum for expression, but also fosters cross-cultural connections between Africans through cultivating a shared experience.

The live performance of these poems is also crucial, as this is where the heart of The Spoken Word project lies; as noted earlier, though these poems are passed intra-continently through video, their primary dissemination is in the in-person expression through performances from national poets and of those poets who have won competitions in their home countries. Doumbia’s perception of the oral poetic experience perfectly explains the poet-audience relationship at play within these contexts:

Spoken Word is a live and immediate experience which manifests in the exchange between poet-performer and audience. The performers have to accept that as they recite the public has an impact, affecting the trajectory of the performance and sometimes of the text itself. Performances vary based on whether they happen at the beginning or end of the night, whether the audience is large or small or whether the audience is particularly lively and engaged... [The poets’] emphasis is always on speaking directly to the audience rather than acting in front of the audience. (Doumbia)

As we have seen throughout this study, the speaker exists as a sort of receptor through the audience's role in setting the mood for the venue. As in conversation, each member functions to contribute through his or her choice to participate (or not) in the dialogue. This cannot happen in Barthes' conception of the author, because the author writes regardless of the existence of a reader, who is further unable to influence the author's writing, as their existence in this communicative relationship comes after the inscription of the text. Yet, Barthes' concept of the reader as the locus of action is correct. It is in the act of receiving the response from the other party (either speaker or audience) that the poem comes to life, whether that be the audience's reception of the speaker's words and emotions, or the speaker's reception of the audience's response. The Spoken Word Project, then, serves to elucidate this complex relationship between Barthes' audience and the oral poems' audiences that subverts the authors' deaths by positioning them as partial-receptors as well.

The Word N Sound Live Literature Company functions to amplify Barthes' conception of the reverberation of the text within the reader through its aims not only as a performative space, but also as a means of broadening the poetic audience. The project attempts "to make a positive impact on youth in the city" by bringing older, more experienced poets in contact with younger, aspiring poets in order to encourage textual proliferation in the future (The Word N Sound Live Literature Co., Web). The project delineates their "target market" as "18-35 year old township dwellers," interestingly, a segment of the population that is often only partially literate (The Word N Sound Live Literature Co., Web). This is due to the project's aspirations to play a role "in social development" both economically (by creating a space for artistic appreciation and

sustainability) and culturally by “mak[ing] accessible the rich and diverse traditions of all South African literatures in written and oral forms” (The Word N Sound Live Literature Co., Web). The program produces “40 weekly events, 16 monthly events, 3 festivals and 1 National Poetry slam” each year and has provided a venue for “over 1,200 young writers and poets and at least 25 international artists” to perform (The Word N Sound Live Literature Co., Web).

Part of the aim of creating spaces for poetry to survive within its audiences is inspiring South African youth to find poetic and literate aptitudes. Mutle Mothibe participates in this project, which runs “poetry workshops at disadvantaged schools” and helps integrate Word N Sound poets “into the curriculum of some schools as study-cases for kids when doing poetry lessons in class” (Mothibe Interview). He notes the success of this project in creating literacy and poetic resonance within these students: “we have seen a lot of talented kids get on our platform and showcase different ways this art can be expressed” (Mothibe Interview). In fostering poetic resonance in children by incorporating its study into curriculum and creating space for student involvement in this arena, The Word N Sound program fosters a heightened sense of Barthes’ influential reader; it is in the interaction between reader and text that this “spark” ignites. And we can see through this case study that the exposure in oral texts allows for a greater degree of fluidity between authorial and receptive roles. Whereas a reader of a written text may have opinions but cannot respond, a poetic recipient can perform in response to the previous speaker due to the proximity between the two figures.

Ultimately, live performances encourage a heightened speaker-listener relationship due to this proximal connection. Barthes’ conception is substantiated and

furthered, through this mode of text. The international connections wrought through The Spoken Word Project and the inter-communal connections of The Word N Sound Live Literature Co. each function to broaden the scope of this relationship through the allowance for the listeners to talk back. The heightened inter-personal and emotional connections oral poetry permits allows for the deep resonance within the recipient that Barthes explicates; the reader is still “simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (Barthes 148). Yet in this forum, the listener can become the speaker much more efficiently and rapidly, as they, too, can influence the performance through their own responses and, further, can *become* a performer as the Word N Sound initiative demonstrates.

4.2 YouTube

“Broadcast Yourself”

This was (until 2012) the slogan professed by Google’s video-sharing subsidiary, YouTube. Founded in early 2005, the website has experienced a rapid ascent in joining the world’s chief modes of visual and audible preservation. Understanding this medium’s incursion into the archival sphere is imperative for examining its effects on artistic production in general. Its ability to document performance in a space both “open and egalitarian” brings the communal focus of spoken word poetry to an international stage (McDowell 261). Without having to be present at a poetic performance, viewers can access a piece at their own leisure; and viewers not typically able to access South African poetry previously now have such performances literally at their fingertips. This increased access thereby widens the communal threshold such poetry seeks to foster through an indeterminately wide network of listeners.

YouTube's relevance to the conservation of oral poetics is in its archival role. Lauren Shohet locates the idea of the archive within the presence of "spatial fixity," which, for her, a service such as YouTube certainly provides (Shohet 68). The site's ability not only to record the performative event, but also to give it a permanent dwelling within a mass of stored information allows the site to function as a preservative agent in the production and passing down of oral poetry. In a sense, this electronic database functions as Barthes' "reader" as it is literally a plane on which all traces of the text are stored. Yet further, it provides a space in which the speaker-recipient relationship is expanded beyond the immediate space and time, which allows for a more "book-like" reception in the Barthesian sense that the reader is unable to influence or respond to the author. While the comments section does function to an extent in this aim, it permits only a delayed interaction between the author and listener, not at all like the interchange present in a live performance.

The formation of digital memory in resources such as YouTube, offers a new mode of remembrance beyond the stagnant existence of the page and the fleeting presence of speech. It allows the vivacity of the poetic experience to exist within a finite and locatable space, much like a book, yet amplified through its visual and auditory connections to the original event. Shohet closely links digital modes of preservation such as YouTube with more standard print archives through both mediums' abilities to link researchers with "the lure of unmediated access" to data (Shohet 73). The benefit of digital modes, though, is that they move "performance history from a recondite scholarly province into a more public domain" (Shohet 71). The increased accessibility that

YouTube provides allows for virtually *anyone* to view recordings and interact within the speaker-audience relationship, albeit from a distance.

This widened access is critically important within the realm of spoken word poetry due to YouTube's ability to connect viewers not only from outside of the immediate performance space itself, but also from outside of South Africa as well. If it were not for such resources, such a protracted inquiry as this one would not have been possible. Oral poetics in South Africa, as have been demonstrated through previous chapters, hinges on the central feature of the creation and promulgation of a sense of community. The experiences defined within such works embody a shared human experience that, once shared beyond the group, aims to connect individuals and break down national or ethnic barriers. KB Kilobyte speaks to this end in a comment about a trend he has noticed in poetry internationally:

it has actually confirmed that sometimes we go through the same struggles and triumphs [*sic*]... I realised we are all going through somewhat the same things. Topics that I found common in my work and everyone else's, be it European, American, SA... etc are about Love, Peace, Dreams, [*sic*] God, Poli-tricks and controversial conflicts. (Ringane E-mail Interview)

Thus, poetry maintains an operative role on a global scale through its unifying factors, and the presence of YouTube and other recording archives perpetuate the form's intents most broadly. This sense of community as fostered through YouTube creates an artificial speaker-recipient connection much in the sense of Barthes'. While viewers may feel as

though they are a part of the crowd in the clip and empowered by the poet's emotions, they are ultimately not present or influential in the transmissive process.

As a listener in America, I can not only access printed versions of the poems, but now with YouTube, can watch them *almost* as if I were present at the event. The sounds, emotions, reactions, and expressions are vitally visible for my interaction. This newfound ability to engage within the speaker-audience hermeneutics is an enormous intervention within the realm of orality. Formerly, individuals not presently located within South Africa would not have the ability to engage within this process at all, but this broadening serves to create an expanded sense of interiority or belonging and engaging within the experience presented (however fabricated this may be). As a former "outsider" watching these recordings, I can foster a sense of understanding and interiority with the group in the video.

Ultimately, though, this hermeneutic interaction through the computer is one-sided; the speaker and other audience members cannot gauge my reaction. Of course, as with any in-person experience, a mediated, recorded version cannot capture the entire essence of the moment, just like watching footage of the Grand Canyon on the Discovery Channel pales in comparison to setting foot on the site in person. Without physical presence, many aspects of the experience are blurred or voided. For example, often times in recordings the camera is positioned within the audience to focus on the performers themselves. While the camera may capture a few heads within the audience, it fails to capture the facial expressions and overall vivacity of the crowd. Sound is the only mode with which it can transmit the audience-experience; cheers or boos serve to fill these gaps and color the audience experience for a mediated viewer.

The sense of interiority that YouTube fosters is fabricated; while I am aware of and participatory in the receptive process of such poem, the poet and audience has no means of knowing my presence, other than the sluggish interaction via the comments section. Further, both they and I have no means of knowing *who else* is participating in this process from such a distance. Through this perspective, the recipient is able to hold and propagate the messages of the text itself, but is unable to take part in the hermeneutic speaker-recipient relationship of the in-person performance.

Additionally, the film and sound quality can vary, meaning many performances leave specific words or facial expressions difficult to glean. Even if the recording quality has not suffered, the mix between the speaker's voice and the often sensational audience reactions on top of the already heavily accented (for a non-South African viewer) English and the puns many performers make with language serve to obscure the viewing experience. While the latter of these concerns (audience noise obscuring performer, accented/jargoned English) are likely present in live performances, the level of recording quality can serve to further amplify such issues, therefore further distancing the speaker-receptor relationship.

KB Kilobyte's clip on YouTube from the Flame Grilled Poetry Session elucidates some of these issues (KB Kilobyte). The clip takes a few seconds to focus upon its opening, beginning with a blurred image of the poet standing on a stage within an enclosed, tent-like room in front of an audience. He begins singing a song in a foreign language (potentially Afrikaans, due to some harsh, Germanic sounds) that the audience is familiar with and chimes in to its singing. KB Kilobyte then begins another song in English, though this time the audience does not participate. Their murmuring provides

consistent background noise, as the camera is situated somewhere within the crowd. At the end of the song the poet sings “South Africa – Whose land?” to which a mixture of responses from the audience excitedly shouting “Our land” and, more despondently, claiming “It’s theirs” arises. KB Kilobyte’s poem, which this clip entitles “Political Poem,” figures apartheid from a new stance, in which the black population suppressed and enslaved their white counterparts. Clearly, racial tensions are still in play within the country, because once the audience recognizes this theme, they begin cheering and whistling approval. The poet makes a concerted effort not to continue the poem until the jeers die down, which assists viewers (especially those through YouTube) gauge his lyrics, though the camera falls back in and out of focus throughout these pauses. The YouTube viewer is left without an image of the poet during these pauses, in which his facial expressions and body language may be telling. While the lyrics are still largely discernable, these flaws in recording as well as the proximity of the camera more so to the audience than to the poet, adapts an online viewer’s perception of the performance in a way, perhaps, a live receptor would not experience. Further, the camera is placed toward the front of the audience, so there is no way for an online viewer to gauge how many people are watching the performance or what sort of people comprise the audience.

In the YouTube clip of Rampolokeng’s collaboration with the Kalahari Surfers on his poem “End Beginnings,” the dual presence of the microphone on stage and the microphone within the recording device muddles the sound quality (Kalahari Surfers). As an online viewer, it is almost impossible to discern what the poet is saying, his thick accent only furthering this interpretive distancing. As in the KB Kilobyte clip, audience cheers and participation further obscure the transmission of sound in the performance. In

this instance, though, the camera is directly in front of the stage and the audience members are behind the recorder, so that these participatory inclusions are not quite as invasive as they are in the KB Kilobyte performance. The music in the background, though I do not believe it overpowers Rampolokeng's verses, functions as yet another aural inclusion in the piece which may complicate reception for a viewer seeking to discern Rampolokeng's poetic lyrics.

These setbacks do not serve to make YouTube a less useful tool; as said earlier, this project would not have been possible without its existence. Nevertheless, it is critical to be aware of how "YouTube, like all technologies, simultaneously delivers and retracts, reveals and conceals" (McDowell 261). A caveat of YouTube is that it cannot necessarily be used as an all-purpose tool. McDowell stresses the need to perform outside research on a topic before resorting to its mediated recordings on YouTube. YouTube certainly creates a visual and audible link between audience and event that non-technological services cannot provide. Yet, its ambiguities beg for further enlightenment, which can be achieved, to an extent, through written form.

Much like music, oral poetry packs its greatest "punch" in performance, though it gains a degree of depth upon a listener's engagement with the lyrics. Beyond the sounds, lights, and expressions, the lyrics themselves reveal a degree of literariness that may not be readily apparent in the performative experience. Not only this, but a viewer must understand the context of oral poetry itself (not only its lineage more broadly, but the physical context of the individual performances themselves) in order to place what they are watching within a spectrum of knowledge. Understanding what competition or performance venue a poem is performed at also colors its reception.

In sum, the utilization of preservative modes such as YouTube has been critically important in the remembrance and dissemination of oral poetic forms. It creates a space for receptors to interact with the text unshackled by geographic location or time. This allowance for distance between the space and time of the performance mirrors the experience of interacting with an inscribed text, through Barthes' envisioning; the receptor is unable to influence or respond to the speaker, maintaining their own impressions and interpretations internally. YouTube diminishes the capabilities of the speaker-recipient dialectic connection in which both agents function to an extent in both roles. Of course, the existence of user-interface additions such as the comments section allows for audience contribution, yet this occurs belatedly and is not necessarily received by the speaker himself. Thus, Barthes' theory does, to an extent, apply to oral poetics through this lens.

4.3 Podcasts and Radio

One facet of oral poetry's rising popularity in South Africa is due to its increased accessibility. Although performance is a more genuine mode of reception, electronic means such as YouTube expand the audience of these poems. Due to South African oral poetry's allegiance to free style verse with largely colloquial terms, radio and podcasts function as a third viable mode of distribution. Though Milton A. Kaplan, a scholar of radio poetics, writes in the 1940s about American poetic dissemination, his encapsulation of the broadcasted poem is accurate for understanding South African poetics as well: "radio poetry, therefore, presents its ideas in simple, everyday words, repeating frequently so that even the inattentive listener finally catches the import of the lines" (Kaplan 28). In this sense, the recipient of radio or podcast poetry functions similar to

that of YouTube in his or her disconnect from the direct speaker-listener hermeneutics, yet moves beyond this and Barthes' conception of the receptor as embodiment of the text by making this receptive process more passive. The listener does not have to go out and buy a book (as in Barthes' scenario) or search for a specific poetic performance on YouTube, rather simply needs to press the "ON" button on their radio or mobile device. Even with a podcast, in which a listener can tune into a program on a specific theme, the material broadcast is predetermined by the producing agency. There is no process of selection and the degree of intended engagement is likely lesser than the prior two modes of distanced textual hermeneutics. By simply listening (whether intentionally or not) the listener again becomes the "single field" of textual origins, yet through an even less hermeneutically engaged process.

One of the main modes of radio transmission of poetry within South Africa is the Badilisha Poetry X-Change, a radio station that seeks to create a space of access to and exposure of oral poetry throughout the African population (Kaoma). Begun in 2008 in Cape Town as an international poetry festival, the project evolved in 2012 into a poetry archive. Now, the project features two new poets each week on the website and via podcasts. They attempt to represent "a broad range of voices, genres, and language, thereby reflecting contemporary trends and evolutions in the medium" (Badilisha, "How We Do It"). The site seeks to represent poets of African backgrounds around the world, and includes a dropdown menu to explore poets by region. Of course, for this study, exploration was limited to poets within South Africa. The site also provides profile pages for each poet, with a photograph, short biography, typed poems and audio clips of the performances. These profiles create a sense of "celebrity" around the poet; the impending

listener knows who is speaking and their general background. These inclusions serve to mend the gap fostered by the listener's displacement from the primary performance venue, and in some sense, provide a greater sense of understanding of the poet than an in-person performance may due to this bibliographic information. Further, the inclusion of the poem's text helps disseminate the message of the poem more accurately; being able to listen to the intended performance (with its emotional indicators) while simultaneously following the poetic text allows for a full digestion of the piece. This also allows the listener to note any discrepancies between the text and the performance, as short phrases may be added or removed from the text in the performance version. The profiles also include a poll that asks "How Does This Featured Poem Make You Feel?" This area allows for greater emotional transmission between listeners; though the poet or an individual listener cannot know who is listening to these recordings and cannot engage with them in the traditional, performative sense, this poll permits a degree of emotional connection between participants and begins to open the door back toward this hermeneutic cycle.

Often, on the radio or on podcasts, simply reading the poems isn't enough; music or other artistic genres assist in making this visually restricted mode of art more palatable. In the 1940s context, Kaplan describes "poetry plays" which created greater interest in radio poetry (Kaplan 28). Today, many South African poets elect to utilize instrumentation and vocalists to assimilate this oral art form to a radio or podcast setting. Afurakan is a seminal oral poet based out of Johannesburg (and is one of the founding fathers of The Word N Sound Live Literature Co.) who is featured on Badilisha's website. His poem "Inner Sense" is the highlighted work on his page, with both its

printed text and audio clip available, in addition to other poems' texts without audio (Badilisha, "Afurakan"). His poem, much like Kaplan's description of successful radio poetry, features "simple, everyday words" and repeats key phrases in order to disseminate his message most strongly to his audience (Kaplan 28).

The poem opens with digitized instrumentals and a chorus of female voices singing about perseverance and paint a picture of a warm day in which they can feel the "sun on [their] head[s]" (Afurakan). The voices fade out and the instrumentals continue as the lengthy poem tells the story of a happy girl turned into a disillusioned and depressed woman, likely due to male mistreatment, and, perhaps, even beatings. Afurakan places a large emphasis the pronouns "she" and "her" by raising his voice slightly at their occurrence and often placing them at the end of lines; the opening lines of the poem sets this trend as he speaks "labeled 'daddy's little joy' for she / born on the seven scales carried / the stars in her smile" (Afurakan). This emphasized enjambment demarcates the female subject as priority and constantly reminds the listener that Afurakan is still focused on the woman's plight. Though the poem begins on a contented note, it quickly becomes dark as the subject grows up: "coz she doesn't smile now" (Afurakan). Further repetitions of this sentiment as well as the fact that the woman "used to believe" in fantasies such as fairy tales, black magic, and reincarnation drill into the recipient the overwhelming change from pleasure to melancholy the poem charts (Afurakan). Without having to listen too intently to the poem, this shift in emotional stance becomes clear through these repetitions and allows for (though does not demand) passivity on behalf of the listener. The poem closes with a reprise of the female chorus and amplification of the instrumentals, though this time, the voices sing of a more

sorrowful perseverance. The chorus includes variations on the opening stanza: “I guess I’m trying to survive / I guess I’m writing to survive / I’m gonna live until I die” (Afurakan). The musical accompaniment quite clearly mirrors the emotional progression throughout the poem itself and ensures the transmission of this message to the listener, regardless of their attentiveness to the substance of the poem itself.

Afurakan’s poem serves as a microcosm of radio’s impact on poetry. Though these poems function without the visual aid that performances and YouTube rely on, through the inclusion of music and repetition the poet can ensure the listener’s reception and digestion of the poetic sentiment. Therefore, the radio or podcast setting serves still to ensure the receptor as a space in which the textual essence endures, as Barthes claims of the novel. The distancing, though, from the hermeneutic connection of the performance space is exacerbated. Badilisha does provide a comments section, as does YouTube, as well as the emotions poll, though these listener contributions are belated and do not impact the delivery of the poem or the mindset of the speaker in this context. The distancing mirrors the distance of the reader-from-author of Barthesian theory. Despite radio and podcasts’ inability to fully allow the speaker to “die” due to the presence of their voice and the maintained awareness on behalf of the reader on a (albeit fabricated) conversational aspect, this mode functions similarly to Barthes’ conception of the book through the removal of the physical presence of the speaker. Therefore the radio or podcast recipient plays a similar role to Barthes’ reader, unlike the viewer of a poetic performance in which such individual functions both as speaker and recipient.

Conclusion

Moving Forward with the South African Oral Poetic Text

Oral poetry has been constitutive of the South African cultural fabric for as long as we have had documentation of the region. It has served in multiple contexts, as we have seen through the trajectory of oral poetics through indigenous, apartheid, and contemporary eras in Chapter 2. Further, it has evolved to meet the needs of its constituents: in communal and hierarchical indigenous societies, the poems are understood to have promoted unity and nationalism while often denigrating Western ideals; in the politically charged decades at the end of apartheid, the poetry followed suit to galvanize protest and outward disapproval toward systematic oppression; lastly, in the contemporary era, political protest seems to be a lesser concern of the poets, as everyday and personal experiences come to the fore.

While today's South African poets are not as immediately politically concerned, social and political experiences are still very much a part of everyday life – of course this is true everywhere to an extent, but likely more so in South Africa due to its recent history. Deep-set racism and racial inequity still plague its streets and inform individual experiences. Economic repercussions of apartheid are still resonant, as “27.9 percent of black South Africans are unemployed compared to just 4.6 percent of whites” and “approximately 18 million out of 45 million people have not experienced the benefits of our newly found freedom” (Verwey 556, The UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs). The lingering racist opinions of whites (and notably Afrikaners¹¹) further

¹¹ This term refers to South African descendants of the original Dutch settlers. The group is highly nationalist and a large subset of this group promoted and implemented the apartheid regime.

fragment South African society. In an interview, Afrikaner novelist Annelie Botes claims in reference to black South Africans, “I know they’re people like me. I know they have the same rights as me. But I don’t understand them. And then... I don’t like them. I avoid them because I am scared of them” (Verwey 551-2). She went on to characterize the group as “angry, violent, uneducated, unskilled, incompetent, baboon-like, and criminal” (Verwey 552). While some of her literary awards were stripped due to these insufferable comments, the author “received about 1,000 mails supporting her comments, members of the public contributed ZAR 10,150 to a fund to replace her lost prize money, and sales of her latest novel *Thula Thula* quadrupled” (Verwey 552). Thus, while apartheid has ended and, perhaps, the politically focused protest spirit that came along with it, there are still profound wounds upon South African society that impact the everyday existence of individuals. Instead of approaching these issues from a broader, political platform as did their 1970s counterparts, contemporary poets often tackle these problems through an individualized or internal lens.

Such interiority creates personal resonance within individual audience members and foster the oral poetic sense of community of the past in a new manner. As we have seen through the poets’ experiences in Chapter 2, oral poetry has claims that “our words are not necessarily different. Our lives are entwined by the fabrics of time and we merely speak the same language at a different people,” “We are the same, everywhere in the world” (Khosi Interview, Nkosi Interview). These commonalities allow participants to relate through, but also *beyond*, political experiences to the core of what it means to be a human being. Despite this impactful, connective resonance, the poetry must reach the people themselves, which, due to preconceptions around the genre, may prove difficult:

I think [if] poetry is [still] to find its way into societal acceptance, we first need to change some stereotypes around poetry/spoken word, write poetry that appeals to the masses and not a select few, educate communities about this genre of art and [create] platforms in media [to] exhibit this art form. The duty of a poet is to mean what they say, to role of poetry is to teach, reveal what is concealed and inspire people (Ringane E-mail Interview)

With the expansion of oral poetry from the stage into electronic disseminative modes, this shift toward artistic acceptance and appreciation will hopefully expand in the contemporary era. Of course, due to the large scope of society today as well as the easy access to so many different modes of art and media, it is not as simple to reach an interested audience as it was back in the days of the /Xam and Xhosa people when performers presented their works to their immediate counterparts. Optimistically, the increase in presence of oral poetry online and through radio or podcasts will serve to broaden the form's transmissive relationship with South African society and foster the same sense of social awareness that its predecessors did.

This exploration into the realm of South African oral poetics, aims to conceptualize the complexities of this textual form and begin to locate this within a broader sense of textuality that includes both oral and written modes. Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" serves as a strong base point for understanding South African orality through a strictly inscribed, literary lens, and demonstrates the commonalities between the two forms of text. The conceptions of author, origins, and audience reception function similarly to Barthes' written texts and underpin the basis of transcriptive writing. Variances between the forms enter at the point of authorial physicality and speaker-

audience proximity which places the oral literary scholar in a conundrum that both requires the Barthesian “death” of the author while confronting the poet’s vitality on the stage or the screen. These differences inform the individualized nature of the oral poem and allow a receptor to, perhaps, open himself or herself up more freely to the emotional intents of the piece due to the shared reaction between the individual, the speaker, and, often, the surrounding audience. In this sense, the oral poetic receptor amplifies Barthes’ conception of the reader as the “single field” in which the text’s traces are held due to his or her proximal relationship to the text and the speaker (Barthes 148). The revelations set forth in this thesis of the interplay between Barthes and South African oral poetry will hopefully advance the oral poetic genre within the South African community and beyond; and legitimize oral poetry as a finite textual form worthy of scholarly inquiry.

Throughout this thesis, we have seen how South African oral poetic history has inspired unity, awareness, and change during most every era of its development. Its central thrust, much as Tolstoy cites for all art, is to produce a connection between its participants, both speaker and recipient. This connection, in turn, creates the aforementioned impacts of connection and transformation by fostering a sense of shared experience and history. Importantly, the presentation of a poem in an oral form permits the speaker’s voice to be heard without mediation from publishers or censorship from the state. It is an immediate, unadulterated mode of human communication. Nova Masango, a South African oral poet, derives inspiration for her work from Audre Lorde. Lorde is a Caribbean-American poet who functions similarly for many active oral poets in South Africa today as she does for Masango due to her focus on social injustices and affirmation of individuality. Lorde’s sentiments, as told by Masango, sharply encapsulate

the human necessity of poetry, whether it be in oral or written form. It is with her words that we end our study:

Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (Masango)

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