

‘Both feared and loved, an enigma to most’¹

Zimbabwean Spoken Word and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment

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Abstract

The ubiquitous use of digital technologies has influenced contemporary African literature, especially with regards to the younger generation of urban poets. Events are posted on the Internet, and many authors use the communication tools offered by social media to create literary networks (e.g. Facebook). Contemporary Spoken Word performances can be seen as artistic practices that merge old media such as live performances or printed texts with new media such as video recordings or social media tools. By focussing on two poems by Harare-based poet Synik my paper describes how Zimbabwean poets of the Born-free generation use digital technology to re-imagine the revolutionary impact of Zimbabwe's artistic tradition of dissident criticism. Furthermore, it aims at analysing how video technology and social media enable artists to re-create the immediacy of live performances within the virtual sphere. My paper also reflects on the meaning of the venue as a space of performance: The monthly event House of Hunger Poetry Slam, for example, took place at the Book-Café, Harare, which until its forced closure in 2015 has been a long-established venue for a multitude of cultural activities. Insofar, space can be seen as the site of performance as well as the space inhabited by a certain community. As mediatized interaction between artists may also be realised in the virtual space, which is both local and global, space gets de-localised and enables artists to create an (imagined) co-presence in time and space.

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The last decade saw an extraordinary increase in technology-based arts in Zimbabwe, especially among young urban artists. Across poetry and music the ‘rapid development in electronic digital imaging technology’ allowed for new creations that have expanded beyond the limitations of physical performance or audio recordings, while social media reached new audiences.² Thus, video, formerly known to be ‘an expensive specialist tool exclusively in the hands of broadcasters, large corporations and institutions’,³ now enabled artists to produce their own documentations of live performances as well as create mediatised performances such as video-

¹Synik, ‘The Sayer,’ , quoted from the South African online archive of African Poetry *Badilisha Poetry X-Change* n.d. 03 February 2017 <http://badilishapoetry.com/synik>, retrieved 03 February 2017.

²Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A history of video art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) 3.

³Meigh-Andrews 3.

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poetry or music-clips.⁴ Yet, the amount and the quality of poetry-videos, music-clips, cultural blogs and websites should not hide the fact that Zimbabwean artists face difficulties when using digital technologies. In Zimbabwe, social media and the Internet are predominantly based on mobile technologies, and traffic, therefore, is limited and costly. Due to the economic crisis and the correlating effects of hyperinflation on the ICT-infrastructure, including electricity, access to the Internet has been reliable only since 2011.⁵ Against this background, access to technology is still an important factor when artists aim to create digital works.

This article introduces two examples of digital video-poetry by Zimbabwean poet Synik. The first video is a documentation of the poem *The Sayer* presented at the *Slam Poetry Express* in Harare, and may therefore serve as an example for live performances transferred to new media. The *Slam Poetry Express* was part of the first *Shoko! Spoken Word and Hip Hop Festival* (2011) in Harare, which I attended during my research stay. It presented international Spoken Word poets from South Africa, Botswana, Malawi, Kenya, Zimbabwe, UK, USA, and Germany. The second video, *2 Elements from H-Town to Berlin*, features Synik alongside beatboxer Mando from Berlin, Germany. It showcases a rap poem that was specifically created as a video-clip and thus aimed not only to please a local audience but also to reach out to global spectators.

Harare based poet, MC, and rapper Gerald Mugwenhi aka Synik is one of the rising stars of Harare's lively spoken word and Hip-Hop scene. Synik performed initially in Bulawayo with *Encrypted Minds* in 2001 before moving to Harare in 2003, where he made a splash at the *House of Hunger Poetry Slam*, an offspring of the famous *Book-Café*. He performed at *Mashoko*, *The Circle*, *Chimoto Poetry Slams*, *The Republic of Pungwe Launch* and *The Shoko! Spoken Word and Hip Hop Festival*⁶ among others before receiving international recognition that came with the online-release of his debut album, *Syn City* (2012), 'which is said to be the first 3D music video from the African continent'.⁷

Context

Synik's performances may be best contextualised in the Zimbabwean Underground Hip-Hop, 'a small, but vibrant Hip hop community' that combines a strong activist attitude with a critical stance towards the government's neo-liberal economic policy and opposes the state-approved Zimbabwean mainstream Hip-Hop style *Urban Grooves*, which is dominating the airwaves.⁸ In addition to the quarrel between underground and mainstream Hip-Hop known in the Western world, the clash in Zimbabwe between Underground Hip-Hop and Urban Grooves is also fuelled by state ideology, economic hardship, and censorship.⁹ With the introduction of the Broadcast Services Act (2001), a quota of 75 per cent local content ensured government control over

⁴According to Philip Auslander 'mediatized performance' is a product of media technology 'that is circulated on television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction'. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor and Francis, 2008) 5.

⁵Julius Heinicke, *How to Cook a Country: Theater in Zimbabwe im politisch-ästhetischen Spannungsfeld* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013) 185.

⁶'Synik Biography,' *Badilisha Poetry X-Change* n.e., n.d., 06 January 2017 <http://badilishapoetry.com/synik>.

⁷Amkelwa Mbekeni, 'Harare - a tribute in hip-hop,' *the Guardian*, 17 October 2012, 09 January 2017 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/17/zimbabwe-harare-hiphop-synik>.

⁸Katja Kellerer, 'Chant down tha System 'till Babylon Falls: The Political Dimensions of Urban Grooves and Underground Hip Hop in Zimbabwe,' *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6.3 (2013) 44.

⁹For detailed information on Urban Grooves see Wonderful G. Bere, *Urban Grooves: The Performance of Politics in Zimbabwe's Hip Hop Music*. (New York: Department of Performance Studies, 2008).

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Zimbabwean radio stations, while at the same time granting support for those young musicians who ‘openly endorsed the state’s ideology, or at least acquiesced to it by being apolitical’ and who, by doing so, became part of ‘a large-scale propaganda project’.¹⁰ Needless to say, underground rappers were rarely among them. On the contrary, their lyrics voice criticism that is born out of frustration and which, as *Toyitoyi Artz Kollektive*¹¹ member Biko Mutsaurwa stresses, results in socio-political activism in order ‘to live out the experience that’s in the poem’:

There is a radicalisation that comes with disillusionment. ... In 2005 [there was] a parliamentary election, very violent and bloody, so the mood was low ... We set up a social center in Highfield,¹² ... as a place where people could come to and hold the hope for the community together. Like you’re doing something beautiful, something you admire, you motivate yourself towards re-building a community.¹³

And it is exactly the ‘community’s grievances or feelings’ that are central to any kind of oral performance and performance poets are most successful when they act ‘as a mouthpiece of the community’.¹⁴ Yet, disillusionment as a driving force for radical activism is not unique to Underground Hip Hop but can be situated within the ‘culture of dissidents in the arts’ of Zimbabwe, which journeyed ‘from anti-colonial protest, to celebration and euphoria at independence, to disillusionment’.¹⁵ Harare’s underground spoken word poets of today strongly relate themselves to that artistic tradition of dissident criticism, as mirrored in the name *House of Hunger Poetry Slam*.¹⁶ By naming their Slam after Dambudzo Marechera’s first publication, the young poets relate themselves to his visionary work as well as to his rebellious attitude, and to the essential emotion that he expressed in this very work, that ‘was simply one of utter despair ... A kind of lost generation feeling.’¹⁷

¹⁰Kellerer 52f.

¹¹The *Toyitoyi Artz Kollektive* is a group of Harare based Hip-Hop Activists. It is part of the *Uhuru Network* that also runs the annual Pan-African festival *Afrikan Hiphop Caravan*, see Biko Mutsaurwa, ‘‘The Afrikan Hiphop Caravan: Building a Revolutionary Counterculture,’’ *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1. 2 (2014) 226.

¹²Highfield is one of the oldest high-density suburbs in Harare: Originally erected as a segregated township in the 1930s by the colonial Rhodesian government to accommodate black labour families it became politically significant in the 1960s as it was home to many leaders of the Zimbabwean African National Union. After independence in 1980 it remained a socially deprived area, also because many political activists and economically successful residents had moved away.

¹³Biko Mutsaurwa, spoken word poet, MC, co-founder of *Toyitoyi Artz Collective*. Biko Mutsaurwa, personal interview by author, Harare, 15 October 2011.

¹⁴Pamela Dube, *Contemporary English Performance Poetry in Canada and South Africa: A Comparative Study of the Main Motifs and Poetic Techniques* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 1997) 40.

¹⁵Chris Kabwato, ‘Arts under Pressure,’ *Agents of Change – Die Rolle von Künstlern Und Kulturschaffenden in Krisen- Und Konfliktregionen*, ed. Ifa-Edition Kultur Und Außenpolitik (Stuttgart: IfA, 2011) 81.

¹⁶The short story collection *House of Hunger* (1978), which narrates township life in colonial Rhodesia, is the prose debut by the late Zimbabwean writer and poet Dambudzo Marechera who became a cult figure among young Zimbabwean readers. See Preben Kaarsholm, ‘Coming to terms with violence: literature and the development of a public sphere in Zimbabwe,’ *Versions of Zimbabwe : new approaches to literature and culture*. ed. Robert Muponde and Ranka Primorac (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005) 19.

¹⁷Dambudzo Marechera (1984), interviewed by George Alagiah, ‘Escape from the House of Hunger,’ *South*, December 1984, 10-11; 10; quoted from Veit-Wild, Flora, *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on His Life and Work* (London ; Munich et al.: Zell, 1992) 176f.

The ‘lost generation feeling’ is an experience spoken word poets of Harare can certainly relate to. They consider themselves as belonging to the ‘born free’ generation, who were born in the euphoria that came with independence, but whose adolescence was overshadowed by the political and economic crisis.¹⁸ ‘We’re born free, but we’re that contradiction that exposes the empty liberation rhetoric.’¹⁹ When in 2003 a group of student activists, who were then the leading voices in the students’ protests against radical changes within the education system, were expelled from University of Harare, they were shocked into disillusionment.²⁰ One of the few places left where the ex-students could publicly meet was the *Book-Café* that, since independence in 1980, had developed a reputation for providing a free space for arts, culture, and political debate. As they were already influenced by the Hip-Hop movement, it seemed logical to create a format where they could voice their needs using rhythm and rhyme. Due to the increasing use of the Internet and social media, the global slam poetry movement along with videos by international spoken word performers were made accessible to Harare’s poets.²¹ Aspects that are central to the slam movement – such as authenticity, diversity, inclusion, democracy and an open-door policy allowing ‘anyone (to) sign up to slam, and anyone in the audience ... to judge’ – were highly attractive to Harare’s spoken word poets.²²

Hence, slam was the artistic mode young poets could adopt when trying to relate to both their Zimbabwean heritage, especially the *Chimurenga*, and to Hip-Hop’s black American origin, and in doing so find their own voice and aesthetics.²³ With slam it became possible for young poets ‘to present a counter position’ that was situated within – and therefore justified by – Zimbabwean revolutionary culture of protest poetry, but without ‘relying on the tools that the status quo [was] using’.²⁴ Thus they could set their voices apart from the official revolutionary propaganda. In the process, digital technologies such as cellphones, computers, and videos emphasised the newness of a slam’s sound and thus served as vehicles to underline the poets’ independence from established genres.

Many of today’s leading spoken word poets of Harare have been groomed at the *House of Hunger Poetry Slam*, and a number of spoken word activities started at this forum, such as *The Shoko! Spoken Word and Hip Hop Festival* co-ordinated by *Magamba Network*, which – in addition to concerts, workshops, roundtable discussions, and break dancing – featured the *Slam Poetry Express* in 2011, where Synik presented his poem *The Sayer*.²⁵

¹⁸Flora Veit-Wild, ‘In die Freiheit geboren? Eine neue Generation Kulturschaffender wächst heran,’ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (9 December 2006) 30 October 2014 <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/startseite/articleELJQB-1.81758>.

¹⁹Biko, personal interview.

²⁰Kush, member and co-founder of *Uhuru Network*, personal interview by author, Johannesburg, 15 May 2013.

²¹The *House of Hunger Poetry Slam* adopted the *Nuyorican Poets Cafe*-rules as established by the US-based nonprofit organization *Poetry Slam, Incorporated (PSI)*: a time-limit of three minutes per poem, five judges to be selected from the audience, the opportunity to apply direct democracy by outvoting the judges’ score whenever the audience would disagree, and the crowning of the king or queen of the mic after three (or more) rounds.

²²Susan B.A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor, MI.: University of Michigan Press, 2009) 5f.

²³The term *Chimurenga* derives from the Shona word for Struggle for Freedom. It usually refers to the second Chimurenga that led to Independence in 1980 (First Chimurenga 1896/97; Second Chimurenga 1966-1979), see Kaarsholm 16f.

²⁴Biko, personal interview.

²⁵*Magamba Network* was founded in 2007 by Harare based spoken word artists Comrade Fatso, Outspoken, and Upmost to organize monthly HipHop events such as *Mashoko* and *Peace in the Hood*, Kellerer 59.

Synik: *The Sayer*

Synik was one of the seven poets from Zimbabwe, who had qualified to perform at the *Slam Poetry Express* of the 2011 inaugural *Shoko! Spoken Word and Hip Hop Festival at Mannenberg*, a jazz club and twin venue of the *Book-Café* in the city centre of Harare, with the majority of the audience being young urban Zimbabweans who shared the poets' passion for spoken word.²⁶ *The Sayer*, an unusually long poem that was already known by many, was greeted with enthusiastic applause.²⁷ The epic poem tells the story of a Sayer, an ancient griot,²⁸ who is described as 'one of the last of the tribe', who 'roamed through wastelands in the darkest of days', bringing with him 'the truth' that he set against those 'liars' who 'wasted the ink for the poems' to exploit and subjugate 'their victims'.²⁹ While he tried to fulfil his 'mission to inspire the vision of small communities' he usually met 'imprisoned minds' until he approached '6 masters in a circle' who 'spoke free', while one of them, obviously a beat boxer, 'gave them the beat'. Yet only after the Sayer entered this circle, 'the ancient ritual of the cypher was complete'. Before leaving the group, he was introduced to the arts of breakdance, scratching turntables, and graffiti, the 'visual poetry [being] sharper than the arrows of man' yet 'these creations were vandalism to the blind'. When the Sayer finally left these 'parched lands', he remained 'a river of hope', his verses 'both feared and loved, an enigma to most'.³⁰

During the performance, the contemplative silence was occasionally interrupted by approving murmurs or even cheering. In contrast to conventional readings of poetry, during which the audience's role is mainly that of listeners, spoken word performances feature an 'immediate, often urgent relationship between the slam poet and the audience'.³¹ This relationship, in which performer and audience are present at the same time within the same space and interact, has been defined by drama theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte as 'bodily co-presence of actors and spectators'.³² The audience's lively participation underlines the importance of the community that thus becomes an integral part of the poetic. Synik directly addresses the community by presenting a poem that reflects the impact of Hip-Hop culture on society – one of the core topics in the genre of rap. Synik accordingly refers to central topoi such as *authenticity* that comes with speaking 'the truth' and *consciousness* that arises from a freedom of mind and enables the rap-poet to criticise society's failures. In mentioning the genre's markings, such as the cipher,

²⁶Even though the festival presented artists from the US, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, the *Slam Poetry Express* was dominated by poets from Southern Africa with seven voices from Zimbabwe, two artists from South Africa, and one poet each from Botswana, Malawi, Kenya and Germany.

²⁷*The Sayer* had been presented during the first of three rounds and scored 27 points (out of 30). Synik was thus one of the eight poets who performed in the second round, where he scored also 27 pts, yet he didn't achieve the third and last round. (Sept 2011, Harare, personal attendance).

²⁸ Synik interestingly traces HipHop's 'oppositional stance' back to the griot, whose 'praise appellations', in contrast, have a rather 'affirmative function'. See Klein, Tobias Robert. 'African Hip-Hop.' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, edited by Stephen Ross, 09 May 2016. Web 14 September, 2016. <<https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/african-hip-hop>>.

²⁹All citations of *The Sayer* are quoted from *Badilisha Poetry X-Change*, where the written lyrics of *The Sayer* have been published alongside two other poems by Synik, <http://badilishapoetry.com/synik>, retrieved 03 February 2017.

³⁰<http://badilishapoetry.com/synik>, *The Sayer*.

³¹Somers-Willet 21.

³²Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 38.

turntables, beatboxing, and graffiti, Synik unmistakably situates himself within Hip-Hop culture. By introducing the figure of the ancient Sayer and naming him ‘griot’, he contextualises his own approach to Hip-Hop within a distinctive African oral poetic tradition and thus also emphasises the internal connection between Hip-Hop culture and poetry. Yet *The Sayer* can also be read or heard as a comment on the situation in contemporary Zimbabwe, with the ‘parched lands’ calling to mind Marechera’s *House of Hunger*, and the underground Hip-Hoppers being the sole ones with conscious minds, able to speak freely in ‘dangerous times when masses were blinded by liars faking the rhyme’. Without explicitly mentioning the *Urban Groovers*, Synik addresses the underground rappers and claims them to be the true heirs of the griot, whose voice commands almost magical skills when ‘carving out kings from slaves’ while he was roaming the world ‘he was hoping to save’.³³

The video of Synik’s performance attempts to capture the vibrant atmosphere of the live performance by focussing on both the poetic performance and the audience, as well as the MC, the timekeeper, and the judges.³⁴ Unlike much documentation of spoken word performances, generally shot with a small handheld camera, the *Shoko! Spoken Word and Hip Hop Festival* cooperates with the professional production company *Nomadic Wax*, which is based in the US and exclusively documents events of the global Hip-Hop culture. The footage was captured by two cameras: a steady cam that focussed on the stage and also provided close-ups of the poet, and a handheld mobile camera that shot from various angles and portrayed both the poet and the audience.

A video documentation of a live performance is often perceived as limited compared to the live performance itself, as an ‘imprisoned version’ that may represent the original yet never embody it, for it is ‘stripped of the dynamism that characterizes [its] living identity’.³⁵ Therefore, the documentation is said to create an ‘isolated event’ due to the lack of one of performance’s core elements: the ‘communal sharing’.³⁶ Yet, the video documentation of a live event, while indeed being a fixed representation of an original elusive performance,³⁷ also provides the poet with ‘an artefact that – unlike the live performance – can be copied, sold, uploaded, or shared with people who didn’t attend the live session’.³⁸ For Harare’s spoken word poets, a video that can be streamed on social media platforms such as *Youtube* provides one of the rare opportunities to publish a poem, to claim ownership of it, and to reach out to global audiences. Thus video recordings are much appreciated, especially when they have been taped at a renowned festival such as the *Shoko! Spoken Word and Hip Hop Festival*, or when the virtual address adds to its artistic value, e.g. *Badilisha Poetry X-Change*.³⁹

³³<http://badilishapoetry.com/synik>, *The Sayer*.

³⁴‘SHOKO! Festival Slam: Synik (Zimbabwe),’ pub. Nomadic Wax Magee, 23 January 2012, 08 January 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0myhq69c_3g.

³⁵John Miles Foley, ‘From Oral Performance to Paper-Text to Cyber-Edition,’ *Oral Tradition* 20.2 (2006) 233.

³⁶Dube 48.

³⁷Ricarda de Haas, ‘Spoken Word Goes Digital. New Forms of Literary Expression in Southern Africa,’ *Kuvaka ukama: a tribute to Flora Veit-Wild* ed Julius Heinicke et al. (Heidelberg: Kalliope-Paperbacks, 2012) 115f.

³⁸Ricarda de Haas, ‘African or Virtual, Popular or Poetry? The South African Spoken Word Platform Word N Sound Series,’ *Popular Postcolonialisms: Discourses of Empire and Popular Culture* ed. Nadia Atia and Kate Houlden (forthcoming, London, Routledge, 2018).

³⁹The South African online archive of African Poetry, *Badilisha Poetry X-Change*, has archived audio recordings and lyrics by more than 350 African poets from 22 countries from both the continent and the global African Diaspora.

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Nevertheless, the footage is indeed shaped by the technological potential of both the camera and the sound equipment. That includes being dependent on the lens' frame, and therefore choosing the best position for an ideal shot rather than the best place to see in the venue, and avoiding interruption by the audience rather than being in the centre of action. For Synik's performance, the video uses the steady cam's position from the back of the venue to present his gestures and his body language as well as his presence on stage. By using occasional close-ups, it also highlights Synik's facial expression which was hardly visible in the live performance. While both images would indeed have been missed out on the interaction between audience and poet, the images provided by the handheld camera, which often filmed from the stage, added a new perspective as they enabled the virtual audience to experience the artist's point of view, and thus get an insight into the reactions of the live audience. Insofar, like every video documentation of a live performance, the video does not provide an insight into the live performance as it had happened, but it is also an interpretation given by the camera team and the post-production, and represents a specific gaze that is shaped by technology and the crew.

While the audience that attended the original performance is captured in the video (and therefore becomes part of the performance), a new virtual audience can also interact by means of social media after the video's release. The users can, and do, comment on the clip, download it, share it, and in doing so become part of a global audience. In this specific case, the (local) audience of Synik's live performance was also re-forming to watch the video: the release of the festival's footage took place as a public screening in Harare six months later at the same venue. It seems that the audience in the virtual space does not consist of anonymous global spectators, but instead is formed out of both the local and the global slam community.

SYNIK & MANDO - 2 Elements from H-Town to Berlin⁴⁰

The first impression of the video *2 Elements* is that of a deep silence superimposed with images of the skylines of Harare and Berlin slowly cross-fading.⁴¹ With the first sound, the image of Synik emerges as he walks down a small street in Harare towards the observer, the sound of his feet accompanied by birds' twitter. A hard cut changes the street into a side road of Berlin-Kreuzberg with Mando the beat-boxer cycling towards the observer, leaving his audience unsure as to whether the screeches in the background are emitted by children and birds or whether they are sounds made by Mando, as imitating seagulls is one of his specialties.⁴² When Mando finally brakes, he is almost touching the camera: 'Yeah-yeah! Hey Synik, what's up?' A cut to Harare allows Synik to answer the greeting, who then asks: 'I got this verse that I want to drop really quick, d'you wanna hear it?', whereupon Mando starts beat-boxing to lend a beat to Synik's poetic performance.

In his rap-poem Synik addresses the need for artists to unite globally for there 'aint no reason for dividing the world we reside in' and introduces Hip-Hop as 'a global force' that spawned a

⁴⁰Synik and Mando, '2 Elements from Harare to Berlin,' Pub. Champupuri Productions, 19 January 2013, 24 April 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulggYIPmhAU>.

⁴¹*2 Elements* was produced by Berlin based *Champupuri Productions* (Shona term for 'whirlwind'), founded by German photographer Johanna Meier, who was also the director of *2 Elements*.

⁴²Mando aka Daniel Mandolini, German Beatbox Champion 2006, 2007 and 2010 (team), European Champion in 2013, Finalist at World Championship in 2015 (team 4xSample), works for Theatre, Musical, TV and Film; Performing Arts Agency Mosaik Entertainment.

'4xSample Beatboxcrew Info,' *Mosaik Entertainment* n.d. 24 April 2017 <http://mosaik-entertainment.de/4xsample/>.

‘generation unified by the language we speak’. This shared language consists of ‘5 elements, 1 love’ and thus refers to the five elements of Hip-Hop culture: graffiti, DJs, MCs, beatboxers, and break dancers, who are united by the love of Hip-Hop as ‘an alliance that shakes the system without resorting to violence’. Similar to his poem *The Sayer*, the rap *2 Elements*, while pronouncing ‘the movement’s relevance, also stresses the creative power of the individual poet, who ‘got lyrical specs so my vision is clear’ and whose verses, therefore, may ‘reach way beyond my physical steps’.

Despite the significant differences of the presented urban spaces of Berlin and Harare, the video suggests a close contact between Synik and Mando: they engage in verbal communication, they cooperate artistically with Synik voicing the lyrics and Mando giving the beat, and they even interact physically by exchanging sunglasses and playing with a small globe that they throw from Berlin to Harare and back. Yet, the video presents each artist in his home town and by doing so emphasises the idea of belonging. The video’s urban setup, which manifests itself in the images of streets, courtyards, urban waste, and graffiti, symbolizes the ‘hood’, which, in the context of Hip-Hop culture, is significant for every artist. The ‘hood’ illustrates the artist’s connection to a specific community as well as to a specific (urban) space of living, and creation. Insofar, it is an important source that fuels the artistic work and also functions as a point of reference. In return, the artist is expected to show his respect and his responsibility towards the community. Thus, in the video *2 Elements* the urban space can be conceptualised as a public space as well as the space inhabited by a certain community, and as the site of performance. Besides, independent space is one of the core elements of Spoken word events where ‘poets support each other’ and ‘create a specific space that matches their needs in terms of artistic expression’.⁴³

According to drama theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte ‘space’ is but one of three aspects that alongside ‘body/embodiment’ and ‘sound’ are relevant to the analysis of performance.⁴⁴ She distinguishes between fixed ‘geometrical space’ (architecture, interior) and ‘performative space’, which is permanently created and re-created by performers and audiences alike.⁴⁵ In the video *2 Elements* the idea of space as an important part of performance is relevant insofar as the performance doesn’t take place at an arts venue but in the public space. Yet, the video also challenges the idea of urban space as a local entity. Unlike *The Sayer*, which documents a live performance, *2 Elements* had been shot as a piece of art in its own right. It does not only represent both the performance and the urban context but also creates a mediated performance and in doing so ‘challenges the assumption that the live precedes the mediated’.⁴⁶ The performance thus addresses not a live (local) audience but primarily aims to attract virtual (global) spectators on the Internet. The question arises as to what extent the use of technology can soften the limitations of space, when the stage and the city as well as the local urban and the global urban become ever more blurred and elusive.

I argue, that the use of digital technologies has paved the way for a new approach to spoken word performances insofar as the camera takes over as the interactive counterpart. In going back

⁴³de Haas, ‘African or Virtual’.

⁴⁴‘Sound’ includes the reciting of the poem, the responses of the audience, and any noise that occurs during the performance, while ‘body’ distinguishes between the actual body of the poet and the character that they embody. see Fischer-Lichte 75ff.

⁴⁵Fischer-Lichte 75ff.

⁴⁶Auslander 11.

to Gregory's concept of a 'forum' that is created by and for artists as a performative space where they can interact, it seems significant that the video suggests communication and physical contact between both artists.⁴⁷ Yet, even though the video of Synik and Mando simulates an immediate interaction between them, it is in fact the camera each artist interacts with. By using the camera as a device that functions as a tool of communication between the performers, the video simulates an (imagined) 'bodily co-presence' of poet and beatboxer.⁴⁸ Yet, unlike social media that enable people to actually meet in the virtual space, the camera creates a 'fake' virtual co-presence: the sunglasses as well as the small globe travelled by plane from Berlin to Harare, and return, as part of the director of photography's luggage.⁴⁹ Thus, the mediated interaction does happen although the artists could in fact not interact at the very moment of the shooting. Therefore, the imagined cooperation would not have been possible without the post-production, which in this case was realised by the director of photography. The video itself gives but one piece of evidence of the artificial creation of co-presence as the beat generated by Mando, as much as it matches Synik's performance, fails to also achieve lip-synchronisation.

Yet, the imagined interaction between the artists does not only reflect upon artistic cooperation within an imagined virtual space, but it is deliberately used to underline the lyrics' message: '2 parts of the world, 2 sides of the game, differences are superficial we one in the same'.

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⁴⁷ Gregory, Helen, '(Re)presenting Ourselves: Art, Identity, and Status in U.K. Poetry Slam,' *Oral Tradition* 23/2 (2008) 204.

⁴⁸Fischer-Lichte 38.

⁴⁹Personal information, the director Johanna Meier.

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