### Special feature: ‘Voices from the Margins’

**Guest Editors Lioba Schreyer and Lena Mattheis**

**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lioba Schreyer and Lena Mattheis</td>
<td>Listening to the Margins: An Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter H. Marsden</td>
<td>Oral Goes Viral – Reversing the Print Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Scanlan</td>
<td>Jamaica Osorio’s Indigenous Poetics as a Challenge to Global Hybridity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricarda de Haas</td>
<td>‘Both feared and loved, an enigma to most’: Zimbabwean Spoken Word and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve Nabulya</td>
<td>A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marvin Reimann</td>
<td>‘This is me, anonymous, water's soliloquy’: The River's Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald's <em>Dart</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotta Schneidemesser</td>
<td>Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s ‘Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lioba Schreyer</td>
<td>Interview with Kayo Chingonyi, Poet and Creative Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayo Chingonyi</td>
<td>Four poems: Kenta, Alternate Take, A Proud Blemish, Interior with Ceiling Fan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complete special feature: Voices from the Margins.
In September 2016, an international group of young scholars came together at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, to discuss their research projects in the context of the workshop *Voices from the Margins: Societal Change and the Environment in Poetry*. Not yet entirely expecting how turbulent the next few months would be in terms of poetry and protest, but very much aware of the increasing relevance of both fields and the hybrids they engender, we wanted to provide a platform to discuss poets who engage with social and environmental issues. The main focus here were poets who write from a position of marginality, be that geographically, socially, economically or on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation. The participating scholars were also interested in the margins of canonization and therefore presented the works of authors who receive less attention due to their location, the issues they discuss or the media of publication they choose. Intersections of these different facets of the term ‘margin’ were central to the workshop and shape our understanding of the concept. As editors, we believe that poetry written from marginalised perspectives creates a collage of defining moments, thoughts and feelings, and that those add to the visibility of key issues and changes in contemporary societies. Following Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, we are particularly interested in ‘discourses of marginality … [that] intersect in a view of reality which supersedes the geometric distinction of centre and margin and replaces it with a sense of the complex, interweaving, and syncretic accretion of experience.’¹ This is the premise under which the selected papers in this special issue investigate contemporary poetic responses to societal and environmental transformations.

Fast forward to 21 January 2017, when images of the Women’s March in Washington and its sister marches across the United States and the globe dominated the media outlets. As those images highlight, marches draw attention to social and political issues through numbers² and did so again at the one-year anniversary in January 2018. Movements such as the Women’s March or Black Lives Matter indicate that protest marches offer a platform to marginalised groups in society. They tell counter-narratives and demand to be heard. Just like the poetic voices we will concern ourselves with in this special feature, protest marches can engage the public and political sphere in a discourse between centre and margin, complicating a binary that we, like Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, seek to problematise.³ Prominently in this special feature, London-based poet Kayo Chingonyi comments: ‘I feel the need, in the writing that I do, to affirm my

² For a helpful visualisation of the numbers of marchers in different cities and countries, see ‘Women’s March – Crowd Estimates – 2017 – Updated 1/22/17,’ *Carto*, January 2017, 11 January 2018. https://geographer.carto.com/viz/a229d5d2-e04a-11e6-9e98-0e98b61680bf/embed_map?utm_source=maplab&silverid=NDExMTk5NTczMzEzS0
³ More specifically, we aim to problematise the ‘marginality [that] is the condition constructed by the posited relation to a privileged centre, an “Othering” directed by the imperial authority’ (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 102) with regard to the canon, the genre of poetry, and the agency of protesters.

sense of belonging to the centre rather than the margins.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, the marginal status of the poets, texts and perspectives presented here remains contested. In the course of this introduction, we will relate our discussion of margins, protest and poetry to arguments the authors of \textit{Voices from the Margins} make while also employing Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib’s poem “The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside”\textsuperscript{5} to illustrate further positions of marginality.

As we implied already, protest and poetry are intertwined on three levels: historically, through immediacy and through shared spaces. Israeli poet Rachel Tzvia Back points out that poetry has “intrinsic attributes and characteristics that mark it as a useful tool for awakening a social conscience, for political activism and protest.”\textsuperscript{6} It is therefore not surprising that the poetic form has a long history as a medium of protest, as we can see in pamphlet wars, the origins of spoken word or rap, as well as in specific genres, modes and discursive formations such as literature of resistance in South Africa, war poetry and even, depending on our definition of ‘poem,’ on the posters carried by protesters. In 2015, the online movement Black Poets Speak Out called to unite ‘thousands of voices insisting on justice.’\textsuperscript{7} Recordings of poets reciting a poem, preceded by the movement’s mantra, were posted in several networks in reaction to the ‘grand jury’s decision on November 24 not to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who murdered Mike Brown.’\textsuperscript{8} One of the later videos added to Black Poets Speak Out was Rob Gibsun’s recital of “The Day After The Election,”\textsuperscript{9} in response to the success of Donald Trump’s campaign in the U.S. presidential election. In using poetry and social media, Gibsun reinforces the connection between the ongoing police violence against African Americans and Trump’s victory, as does Willis-Abdurraqib’s poem itself. It alludes to large-scale protest but is set in a soul food restaurant, a marginal safe-space. This juxtaposition of small, marginal and wide-open public spaces runs through the articles of this special feature as a common thread. Movement across these spaces is emphasised through performance, whether it be live or recorded and distributed online.

In “‘Both feared and loved, an enigma to most’: Zimbabwean Spoken Word and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment,’’ Ricarda de Haas analyses how these distinct locations of marginalised poetry are woven together and create transnational collaboration, reception and protest through the use of, among other media, YouTube videos made by Zimbabwean slam poets. De Haas illustrates this phenomenon by zooming in on a collaboration between Zimbabwean poet and rapper Synik and Berlin-based beatboxer Mando. In \textit{2 Elements from H-Town to Berlin}, the two artists link distinct local places in Harare and Berlin-Kreuzberg through their joint performance and a style of video-editing that implies direct movement and small distances between Zimbabwe and Germany. De Haas examines how the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Interview with Kayo Chingonyi, in this special feature, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Rachel Tzvia Back, “‘A Species of Magic:’ The Role of Poetry in Protest and Truth-telling (An Israeli Poet’s Perspective),” \textit{World Literature Today} 88.3-4 (2014) 31.
\item \textsuperscript{8} \textit{Black Poets Speak Out}, ‘About Us’.
\item \textsuperscript{9} ‘Black Poets Speak Out – “The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside” by Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib,’ \textit{YouTube} uploaded by Rob Gibsun, 16 November 2016, 11 January 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRQF0h4D9M.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}

familiar space of the ‘hood’ is thereby contrasted with an international audience watching the mediatised performance.

To contextualise Synik’s oeuvre, De Haas introduces the *House of Hunger Poetry Slam*, arguably the most prominent one in Zimbabwe, thereby indicating a recurring theme that connects several of our authors, namely that of orality and the poetry slam itself. Slam poetry, Susan Somers-Willett observes in the context of the U.S., often focuses on marginalised voices in opposition to privileged centres. She draws attention to how the ‘liberal and well-meaning concern with difference … unconsciously reifies the position of whiteness, straightness, and maleness as the norm.’¹⁰ While the binary of us v. them, margins v. centre is often the crux in protest, our interest in the marginal perspectives focuses on ‘embracing … that marginality as the fabric of social experience.’¹¹ The fact that marginal positionalities are often employed in poetic voices to discuss global issues is another factor that distorts a perceived binary. Environmental concerns are a prominent example of this. In ‘A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa,’ Eve Nabulya analyses three environmental poems from the anthology *Echoes Across the Valley* (2000) and explores local experiences and visions of the effects of droughts and floods. She considers not only the research done on apocalyptic discourse but investigates the impact of the poetic mode, which lends itself to the discourse on climate change as political commentary. Moreover, Nabulya’s close readings emphasise the emotiveness that is characteristic of poetry.

Poetry’s engagement with contemporary issues and its potential in offering fresh perspectives is particularly visible in its relation to journalism, as Jahan Ramazani discusses in his seminal monograph *Poetry and Its Others*. In the chapter ‘Poetry and the News’ he explains that ‘the larger story of twentieth and twenty-first-century poetry’s intertwining with newswriting is often both affiliative and agonistic.’¹² Poetry and news differ in their perspectives on current events: ‘The arts and their patrons look toward the distant horizons of the future; the newspapers are fixated on the now.’¹³ Poems do not simply lay out a political argument but draw the reader into the conflict, lending emotional agency as well as urgency. The perspective of poetry allows readers and writers alike to connect elections with soul food spots, natural disasters across the globe with the racial divide between the persons responsible and the victims.

The latter is the subject of Emma Scanlan’s article ‘Jamaica Osorio’s Indigenous Poetics as a Challenge to Global Hybridity.’ Her reading draws out how Osorio’s poem ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ combines the global with the local Hawaiian perspective, thereby creating a causality between economic power, racial discrimination and environmental disasters. Osorio wrote ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ in California while watching a tsunami approach her home, Hawai’i, on television. Affirming Ramazani’s observation about the relationship between the two genres, poetry and the news, Osorio’s poem originates from a news report on the one hand and criticises the medium for neither engaging its viewers emotionally or lastingly. Scanlan explains the many ways in which the poem addresses and engages not only Hawaiians but the wide audiences of slam poetry.

---

¹¹ Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin 103.
¹³ Ramazani 68.
The rising popularity of spoken word and its impact on the poetic form are explored by Peter Marsden in his commentary on how the ‘Oral Goes Viral.’ His analysis focuses on the contemporary Maori and Polynesian poets who, like Osorio, revive and revise oral traditions, while also discussing the oral performance and its relation to the written word in general. Marsden comes to the conclusion that a live performance is already a form of publication which, by actively engaging a participating audience, might even carry more weight as a medium of protest than its written counterpart. The binary of written and spoken is furthermore unsettled by virtual presentations of poetry: slams and spoken word performances, as well as canonical poetry readings by well-known actors are propagated through YouTube and other social media platforms. Poets, established and new, have taken to Twitter (Benjamin Zephaniah, Brian Bilston) and Instagram (Rupi Kaur, Alicia Cook), and there are several apps dedicated to the genre (The Love Book App, POETRY from Poetry Foundation).

Whether news, stage or virtual space, so far, we have paid little attention to the more traditional ways of publishing poetry: in anthologies, journals and in pamphlets such as Campaign in Poetry (The Emma Press, 2015). Emma Wright, founder of the latter, explains that she and her team ‘wanted to make an anthology which would capture and inspire momentum for change,’ thus illustrating similar trends to those that we identified in protest poetry. In more conventional media, too, poetry addresses current topics and demands active engagement. The conclusion at this point is as simple as it is obvious: poetry is alive and kicking! A suitable form of protest, poetry constantly re-invents itself, bending and breaking language and form, and drawing its readers into the conflict by choosing more interactive and immediate modes of publication, transmission and reception.

The texts examined by our writers all share an additional common feature, as they express life experiences which may appear liminal. Especially through performative, interactive and viral forms of poetry, a diverse readership gains access to equally diverse texts and lifeworlds. In order to read poetry from the margins, we have to actively engage with places, languages and experiences that would otherwise remain foreign and distant. This intense involvement of the reader is facilitated by the transcultural nature of the marginalised texts. Readers, writers and scholars of poetry can find commonalities that make the often strongly contrasted realms of experience relatable. Frank Schulze-Engler’s definition of transcultural studies as being concerned with ‘realities of individual and collective lifeworlds shaped by the ubiquity of phenomena and experiences relating to transnational connections and the blurring of cultural boundaries’ forms a foundation for the analysis of such perspectives. In ‘Finding a “German” Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick’ for example, Lotta Schneidemesser details the process of translating the Maori and Samoan Anglophone poetry of Courtney Sina Meredith into German. Employing her own experience as a translator, she explains how often the cultural, national, and linguistic transitions pose obstacles, but at the same time emphasises the universality of certain themes which provide both herself and her anticipated German readers with a way into New Zealand poetry. Many of the issues raised in

---

Meredith’s poetry collection are therefore ‘not entirely bound up with a certain time or a certain place but are transcultural.’\textsuperscript{16}

Bringing together the common themes of marginalisation, protest and transcultural understanding, which run through \textit{Voices from the Margins}, our reading of Hanif Willis-Abdurraqib’s poem ‘The Day After The Election I Did Not Go Outside’ illustrates what ‘listening to the margins’ looks like in practice. The poem already suggests protest – or the absence of it – by means of its title. Willis-Abdurraqib sets the scene just after the fateful day of the 2016 U.S. presidential election in a multicultural urban environment. Immediately contradicting the title of his poem with a ‘But for a moment’ (v. 1), the speaker goes on to describe his trip to a soul food restaurant where fragmented glimpses of a marginalised space within a transcultural cityscape create a complex image that oscillates between the everyday and the unexpected. While the urgency in the speaker’s voice grows throughout the text, the ending suggests that even shock and protest have become mundane.

Our perception of the marginal space is also determined by the speaker’s voice and point of view. Similarly, Marvin Reimann’s article "‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy:’ The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s Dart ‘reconstructs the many voices connected to the poetic portrait of the river Dart and analyses how they merge into one. In this process, Reimann finds numerous structural analogies between river and voice through which he carefully composes a reading that centres on the equality of human voices and those of nature. While Reimann evens out the hierarchy between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric by illustrating how a literary text can function without a human perspective at its centre, ‘The Day After The Election’ focuses very much on the human experience of a restaurant but employs a similar strategy in that it combines a multitude of voices into one and gives space and setting an agency which matches that of the speaker.

The central and most active space in Willis-Abdurraqib’s text is the soul food restaurant. The main body of the poem consists of a list of traits that characterise the eatery:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
\item But for a moment, to drive to the soul food spot on Congress ave. where utensils, large & made for the hands of no one living among us, hang on the walls & where the woman behind
\item the counter yells out my order before my second foot makes it in the door & where her laugh is like my sister’s or where her laugh is like my mother’s or where her laugh is like my grandmother’s … (v. 1-8)
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

The restaurant is a space of community. More than by décor or food, it is defined by its function. It is a sanctuary for women, men and children who are provided with a place where everything remains the same despite the fact that so much has just changed (cf. v. 40-44). The centrality of a detailed depiction of this one small space underlines how ‘spaces are not simply the passive backdrop to significant sociohistorical action, rather they are a vital product and determinant of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Lotta Schneidemesser, in this special feature, 4.
\end{footnotes}
Interestingly, all authors featured in *Voices from the Margins* stress this point in their respective analyses, although space plays a different role in each text. Whereas de Haas recounts the history of physical performance spaces, such as the *Book-Café* in Harare, Nabulya’s eco-poetic analysis posits the natural environment at the centre of her approach. At the same time, all authors, Schneidemesser and Marsden in particular, concern themselves with bridges built between distinct places. The same tension between the uniqueness of place and a shared sense of commonality is visible in ‘The Day After The Election.’

In describing the restaurant, the speaker moves from past tense in the title, which clearly anchors the poem temporally, to present tense in the poem. The present tense serves not only as a means of expressing habits and general truths; it communicates continuity, a main theme of the poem. The contrast between title and poem, past and present tense emphasises the friction following the election of Trump. However, the poem keeps landing on the side of continuity:

...& where those men ignore the yelling & the marching on the television & where I imagine those men have seen this movie before & know its ending & yet are still here to watch it again & where the plates rattle when one of the men shows his hand & says his partner ain’t shit & where I laugh because these men could be my father & around the right table, I am everyone’s child & where the stereo is from the 90s & so is everything that crawls out of it

& where Lauryn sings how you gon’ win if you ain’t right within & I am (v. 18-25)

Continuity and sense of community are moreover visualised by the ampersand, which connects the fleeting and fast-paced sense impressions that make up the soul food restaurant and the surrounding city, suggesting ‘the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli.’ According to Georg Simmel, it is this overstimulation that characterises metropolitan life. Since this experience is universal to most urban spaces, the ampersand connects not only the sense impressions of the speaker but offers a nodal point for possible connections with similar communities and spaces all over the globe. This reflects the experience that all authors in the special feature share: encountering commonalities in singularity. In exploring marginalised poetry, all of them find different answers to a question that Edward Said posed over a decade ago: ‘Can one formulate a theory of connection between part and whole that denies neither the specificity of the individual experience nor the validity of a projected, putative, or imputed whole?’

In his poem, Willis-Abdurraqib answers a related question which also preoccupied the marching protesters: Where do we go from here? The simplicity of the answer – the soul food spot, a place of comfort and community – sets the political events in a broader context.

---

Ramazani’s statement about poetry’s gaze towards ‘the distant horizons of the future’\textsuperscript{20} applies here too: When the speaker returns to the day after the election in stanza eight, he talks about children playing in the streets. In opening the poem to a new setting, the speaker broadens its view to take in the big picture. He singles out this one day and the one short moment in a restaurant but discusses both through the lens of continuity.

... & so I say, then:
make a border around any place you are loved & call it yours.
make a border around those who hold you up & build what
you must to keep the devils out. ... (v. 33-36)

Willis-Abdurraqib’s connection of protest and poetry takes us back to our opening reflections on the images of the Women’s Marches and Black Lives Matter movement. These verses turn Trump’s campaign of scaremongering and hate into a sanctuary of love and protection. As a form of protest, the poem acknowledges both conflict and rupture, but through its emphasis on continuity and community also offers a broader perspective and disrupts binaries of margins and centres.

\textbf{Lioba Schreyer} is writing her doctoral thesis about Indigenous poetry as a platform in the struggle for land rights and justice in Australia. She finished her Master’s degree at the University of Duisburg-Essen in 2014 with a thesis on the loss of language in Irish poetry, which she researched at the University of Limerick, Ireland. Lioba also holds a Bachelor’s degree in English and Dutch. She was a lecturer at the University of Duisburg-Essen from 2014 to 2016 and joined the staff at the Ruhr-University in Bochum in 2017.

\textbf{Lena Mattheis} is a lecturer and doctoral student in the Anglophone Studies Department at the University of Duisburg-Essen. After completing a year of social service in the field of cultural education, she studied French and Anglophone Literature, as well as Media Studies, at the University of Duisburg-Essen (2010-2015). Lena finished her studies with an Master’s thesis on urbanity in Namibia that she researched during an internship at the University of Namibia in Windhoek. Her PhD project is focused on translocality and urban space in global Anglophone fiction.

\textsuperscript{20} Ramazani 86.
Works Cited


Acknowledgements

First and foremost we wish to thank the authors – scholars, translator and poet – without whom this special feature, quite literally, would not have been possible. We want to thank them for contributing their work, both to the workshop and now to the special feature, for the most pleasant cooperation in the editing process and for their readiness to respond to all types of queries (including a request for holiday pictures).

The main research area Transformation of Contemporary Societies at the University of Duisburg-Essen – Maike Müller in particular – provided not only funding but also advice and support from our first call about the possibility of a workshop throughout the project until its publication. With Patricia Plummer, Barbara Buchenau and Jens Gurr, we found three advisors who shared our enthusiasm and their knowledge along the way. We are particularly grateful to have found such a supportive publisher with Transnational Literature and Gillian Dooley, who answered our every question at a moment’s notice. Special thanks go to Frida Heitland, tireless assistant whose every e-mail comes with a smile, and to the village: colleagues and friends, students and secretaries – we owe you one!
Oral Goes Viral – Reversing the Print Revolution

Peter H. Marsden

Abstract

This paper attempts an evaluation of the phenomenally rapid growth over the past few decades of spoken-word poetry – a genre which is currently attracting more and more exponents across the globe, whose work is being disseminated with increasing speed to a worldwide audience. It is a genre both facilitated and shaped by the most modern of electronic media. After revisiting classic definitions of orality vs. literacy as media of communication, particularly in poetry, the paper goes on to illustrate the phenomenon via an examination of specific instances of a relatively recent revival of the oral tradition by Aotearoa New Zealand poets within the broad context of the Maori Renaissance. These authors, ranging from Hone Tuwhare via Muru Walters and Apirana Taylor to Robert Sullivan, might be said to have paved the way and set the pace for the meteoric post-millennium emergence of a substantial cohort of predominantly female poets from a Polynesian – and very often specifically Samoan – background, among them notably Sia Figiel, Tusiata Avia, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Courtney Sina Meredith. What these two groups have in common is their location on the margins of society and their articulation of protest against the associated status quo.

* * * * *

The last several years have seen an exponentially, indeed explosively, increasing global dissemination of spoken-word poetry in English – a genre which is being simultaneously facilitated and shaped by state-of-the-art electronic media. One case in point, which happens to lie within my own personal field of academic interest, is the relatively recent revival by Maori and Polynesian poets of their respective indigenous oral traditions. Comparable instances of this rapidly unfolding phenomenon can, however, easily be found in many other parts of the world too. Even the most cursory of glances at the list of scholarly contributions to the 2016 Essen workshop ‘Voices from the Margins’ is sufficient to confirm the huge geographical spread and cultural reach of the genre. Alongside Pacific exponents, this local microcosm alone comprises items from the UK and the US, Zimbabwe, East Africa, the Caribbean, Pakistan and West Bengal.

Etheridge Knight’s assertion that ‘there were poets long before there were printing presses’¹ may well encapsulate a truism, but like many truisms it is no less true for being obvious. An inmate of Indiana State Prison for the best part of a decade, Knight (1931–91), reportedly a superb practitioner of one of Black America’s many vigorously expressive oral genres: ‘toasting,’ achieved a considerably wider profile as the author of Poems from Prison (1968). Much of Knight’s prison poetry, according to Patricia Liggins Hill writing in Black American Literature Forum, ‘focuses on a modern kind of enslavement, imprisonment, and searches for


and discovers ways in which a person can be free while incarcerated." Even out of what must surely be the ultimate form of marginalization, poetry can emerge.

The gradual supplanting on a wide scale of the term oral by spoken-word – ‘a form or genre of poetry intended to be performed to an audience’ – from the 1970s onwards might seem to be indicative of the sea-changes that have been taking place. The breathtaking virality of this phenomenon enhances and vastly broadens the scope of a performer’s empowerment and consequent emancipation, freeing her or him – at least apparently – of the restrictions of first having to find a third party who may or may not want to publish their work. Not for nothing is the modern medium for so many such messages called YouTube: It’s yours – not ‘theirs’; it’s your platform from which to express your ‘I’ – a truly grass-roots democratic set-up. Giving voice to the marginal is a way of ‘channelling’ it. No longer forced to listen passively (and devoutly) to ‘Your Master’s Voice,’ you can achieve mastery through your own voice, with a considerable chance of thereby removing yourself from the margins to centre-stage. First it goes oral, then visual, and then viral – all thanks to YouTube.

Further support, leading to more empowerment, is available via powerpoetry.org. In full do-it-yourself internet mode, this website offers definitions and instructions on ‘how to do things with words’. Spoken-word poetry is a speech act. Perhaps more properly, a series or sequence of speech acts or, in Hymesian parlance, a speech event – ‘event’ both in this (technical, linguistic) sense and in the more general sense of an occasion that can be (stage-)managed. Significantly, the base illustration on the website is an image of a woman – wearing a headscarf. Topical stuff, this! Contentious stuff, too, highly political, politically charged. It’s all about (poetic) power to the people, power to the voice, voice/s to the people, especially to those who without the internet as their outlet would effectively remain – silent – on the margins. Now they can stand up and speak out, call attention to themselves, be out-spoken, in full accordance with one of powerpoetry.org’s mottos: ‘If you don’t learn to write your own life story, someone else will write it for you.’

Increasingly, public performance is being privileged over conventional publishing, making the private public. And publishing is ceasing to be a status that can only be achieved through a (decidedly for-profit) commercial enterprise, aka ‘a publisher,’ making it that much more difficult for invidious distinctions to be casually and cavalierly made between ‘poets’ and ‘published poets’.

As Lioba Schreyer and Lena Mattheis put it in their Introduction to the present project (‘Listening to the Margins: An Introduction’): ‘A suitable form of protest, poetry constantly re-invents itself, bending and breaking the language and form, and drawing its readers into the conflict.’ The last point hints sharply at the dimension of commitment and activism to which spoken-word poetry lends itself so well as a medium, a vehicle that involves the poet’s listeners as intrinsic and integral elements – an active, participating audience – in the live performance. By performing the poem, the poet is already publishing it – in the sense of making it known, presenting it to the outside world, a process which can dispense with the outside agency of a

---


3 Spoken word,” Oxford Dictionary Online, 06 December 2106

4 The switch from upper to lower case might be seen as subtly flagging up the next step after PowerPoint.

5 If you don't learn to write your own life story, someone else will write it for you,” no editor, place or date of publication. 06 December 2016 www.powerpoetry.org.

6 In this special feature: Mattheis, Lena and Schreyer, Lioba. ‘Listening to the Margins: An Introduction.’ 4.
publisher. One might even go so far as to say that the poem is publishing itself. This is not to deny that videoing a live performance which is then uploaded to YouTube may also involve forces and influences external to the poet and the text but inherent in the medium, such as decisions about camera angles, the way the performer uses the microphone, the addition of props, scenery, video clips and other instances of directorial intervention – any or all of which may affect and alter the character of the finished product. So far from being a one-to-one ‘translation’ or transposition of the text into another, different medium, the outcome is more than likely to have been shaped by the medium that facilitates its publishing in the first place.

What we are looking at is the fascinating phenomenon of a revolution (in the present case, the print one) being reversed. It’s ‘Goodbye Gutenberg!’ time – movable type was yesterday; now it’s the world that has moved on. In temporal terms, the oral has always preceded the written – whether in the linguistic development of the individual native speaker or over historical time in the development of speech communities. Then for centuries the written gradually came to take precedence over the oral in terms of social status, as an indicator of putative educatedness, and social status. It is a linguistic commonplace that all languages exist in an oral form – many, worldwide, have no written form. Written-ness is by no means an indispensable prerequisite for language survival. And in the last generation or so, electronically transmitted orality would seem to have been unstoppably overtaking written-ness as the medium of choice.

Orality vs. literacy
The late twentieth century saw a great deal of soul-searching among scholars as to whether the concept ‘oral literature’ might not perhaps be a misnomer, a contradiction in terms – the general idea being that literature is derived from Latin litera (pl. literae), meaning in the original sense letters written in some form or other and therefore an inappropriate concept in connection with oral transmission. To get round this supposed problem, the companion (morphologically equivalent and semantically ‘correct’) term orature was coined (by the Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu) but it hardly seems to have caught on. In any case, perhaps one should try to free oneself of ideological semanticism and pedantic purism, not to mention etymological literalism. Why not, for instance, simply substitute phoneme for letter as the basic unit of the oral?

Significantly in the context of speech and the production thereof, one and the same word in Maori, namely pukapuka, can be used to mean either ‘book’ or ‘lungs’. Voice comes – is projected – from inside the whole body. Breath – essential for life (primarily) and speech (secondarily) – emanates from the lungs, having been pushed upwards by the diaphragm. Consider the Maori notion of tihei mauriora – literally ‘I sneeze, it is life’. The explanatory comments offered by editors Albert Wendt, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan on the title they chose for their second anthology of Polynesian poetry in English are very pertinent to this notion:

The term ‘mauri ola,’ or ‘mauri ora,’ is found in most Polynesian cultures. In combining the Māori ‘mauri’ and the word ‘ola,’ common in many Polynesian languages, the new pan-Polynesian title makes the anthology more inclusive of all our peoples. Mauri or mauli is the location of the emotions, usually the centre of the person: the moa (Sāmoan), the nā’au (Hawaiian), the ngākau (Māori). Ora or ola is life, to be alive. Together, mauri ola is the life

---

7Pio Zirimu, Wikipedia no editor, place or date of publication (last edited 20 October 2017). 02 January 2017
force that runs through all things, gives them mana and holds them alive and together. Language is at the heart of every culture: it is what binds, defines and expresses the mind, heart, spirit and body of that culture, and it also reflects cultural changes and new directions. *For us, poetry is the maori ola of language.* Tihei mauri ora! Look, we are still alive, we are still here! Despite the radical changes we have suffered, and are still undergoing, we are vibrantly alive and well and continue to define, to determine and to create ourselves and our destinies. The poetry in this anthology expresses that loudly and proudly.8

Considering that the literal meaning of the Maori nā’au is ‘intestines,’ it might not be too far-fetched to see a parallel here to the English notion of ‘gut feeling,’ connoting, as both expressions do, the reliability and authenticity of the deepest-seated intuitions when these are body-based. In effect, Maori orators (whose ‘sneeze’ may remind us of a newborn child clearing his or her ‘air-ways’ or air passages to take the first breath of life) are announcing that their speech organs are ready to perform – perhaps comparable in a Western context to the clearing of the *throat* preparatory to speaking. Oral performers inhabit – and are inhabited by – their poetry; the poem lives and breathes and has its being within its author. Thus, an oral performance can project an authorial authenticity that is not producible via the mere parroting of a written text, whereas Western cultures, by contrast, have come to regard the written as definitive, as (legally) binding.

The existence – and persistence – of this profound and fundamental cultural divide is exemplified by the experience of the unnamed Maori elder in Patricia Grace’s 1980 story ‘Journey,’ when he takes the eponymous rail trip from his native village to the capital city in a last-ditch fight for his family’s land, which has been marked out for Government redevelopment. He is confronted in the ministry responsible (not, unfortunately, a responsible ministry) by an overbearing Pakeha bureaucrat with documentary ‘proof’ that the old man’s ancestral land no longer belongs to him. The old man retorts: ‘that’s only a piece of paper and it can be changed, you can change it’9 – a remark that succinctly sums up the status of the written word in his culture as opposed to that of the government official. In the context of a Pakeha/Maori face-off, it cannot be ruled out that this simple affirmation might be alluding to another – much better-known but equally contentious – ‘piece of paper’, namely the Treaty of Waitangi, the controversy about the ‘correct’ interpretation of which continues to dominate the discourse of daily life in Aotearoa New Zealand. Not for nothing do many Maori scathingly refer to this historical – and historic – document as the ‘Cheaty’ of Waitangi. The British colonizers *wrote down* what rights the Maori had – to be precise, what rights they thought the Maori should have – in their own native country. In more senses than one, the two ethnic groups continue to speak a different language, and to a not inconsiderable extent the difference is also that between a written language and a spoken tongue.

Crucially, the notion of literacy is itself equivocal. *Literate* can be quite neutral in the sense of ‘being able to decipher letters’ or ‘having a command of the alphabet’.10 The word may also denote ‘possessing/having knowledge of (many) (literary) texts – of literature (with or without a

---

10 Cf. latter-day figurative usages such as ‘computer-literate’.
capital L). But there is also a value-judgmental meaning with strong connotations of ‘educated,’ or ‘cultured’ – the corollary being an equation of illiterate or non-lettered with ‘uneducated’ or ‘uncultured’. The notion of being well-read in the sense of well-informed implies that knowledge can only be derived from, or transmitted via, the printed word.

Various attempts have been made to catalogue the principal characteristics of orality – especially as compared and contrasted with literacy – but perhaps none so exhaustive and systematic as those of Walter J. Ong. Ong’s foundational and seminal work, particularly as enshrined in his key volume *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) has been built on and taken further by many subsequent scholars, prominent among them Viv Edwards and Thomas J. Sienkewicz, for instance in their catchily subtitled 1990 volume *Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rappin’ and Homer*. Ong pinpoints four major criteria, or bundles of features, for evaluating oral text (for which he favoured the terms: ‘oral art forms’ or ‘verbal art forms’ – neither of which, incidentally, could be said to be usefully free of ambiguity) by implicit or explicit contrast with written texts: evanescence, memorability, non-closure, and contextual features. In what follows, I will briefly revisit these criteria in turn, from the perspective of our current standpoint.

First, evanescence, memorably formulated by Ong as follows:

All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a spatial relationship to time unlike that of the other fields that register in human sensation. *Sound exists only when it is going out of existence*. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word ‘permanence’, by the time I get to the ‘-nence,’ the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone.11

What is increasingly and readily available to us now in forms and dimensions unimaginable at Ong’s time of writing in the early 1980s12 is the ability to capture that evanescence and record it using means substantively different from either script or writing, namely electronic impulses. The word ‘permanence’ as spoken at a particular point in time does indeed vanish – as do its constituent syllables – but nowadays it can, if recorded using technical equipment, be retrieved more or less at will. We can re-wind or fast-forward the recording so that what was or has been originally delivered orally can – thanks to modern, especially electronic and digital, technology (whether CD, video or DVD/Blu-ray) – be not only fixed and preserved but also very flexibly reviewed and handled. The possibilities opened up by these modern media are endless, the implications for creative potential enormous.13

Second, memorability14 – a category constituting the rationale for many prosodic and narratorial features of oral work. Self-evidently enough, the material (text, script) for an oral performance – in other words, for something that has to be learnt by heart or committed to memory – needs to be constituted in such a way that it is memor-able, memorizable, and to make use of certain rhetorical or prosodic features (mnemonic aids, or aides-mémoire) that might

---

12For the record, Ong did produce a revised version of *Orality and Literacy* in 2002.
13As the subtitle of Ong’s book implies, the very first technological medium in which orality was expressed was print. Since that was the norm in the Western world for so long and hence ‘backgrounded,’ there is sometimes a tendency for those familiar with print to forget that it too is only a medium.
14See Ong 26, 67.
appear repetitive, or over-formulaic, in a written text. Interestingly, the verb to record is derived via Old French from a Latin root: recordari, meaning ‘to repeat (or store) in the heart (cor, cordis)’ – the traditional metaphorical seat of the memory – something heard through the ears, in order to remember it. Hence the idiomatic sense of learning something by heart. By contrast, recording a message – whether on the page, on a tape or on a silicon chip – removes it from inside the body to an external location. But here too, technological developments are available nowadays which can reduce the burden on both heart and head. Think teleprompters.

Third, non-closure: 15 This is a quality shared with much modern and postmodern literature in Western culture/s. The oral text, being the authorial product of a community rather than an individual, is – theoretically at least – capable of indefinite, infinite extension; indeed, it is almost by definition incomplete. The speaker develops patterns which in the manner of building-blocks with a fixed underlying (metrical) structure can be assembled ad infinitum, a prime example being the basic stanza structure employed by Selina Tusitala Marsh in her signature tour de force ‘Fast Talkin’ PI’: three lines, with three heavily accented beats in the first two and seven in the third – all insistently ending with the same (key) word: ‘PI,’ just to make absolutely sure the point hits home:

I’m a fast talkin’ PI
I’m a power walkin’ PI
I’m a demographic, hieroglyphic fact-sheetin’ PI16

Fourth, contextual features17 – by which are meant paralinguistic elements such as body language including gesture and facial expressions, but also in a more general, wider, sense: eye movements, body posture, use of space (proxemics) etc; prosodic features such as intonation, volume, pitch and pace; visual and musical support systems, choreographic elements – all of which may substantively complement the oral text proper. These (contextual, paralinguistic) features strike me as being the cluster of criteria most relevant to recent and current developments in what we might term ‘the new orality’ – in the form of spoken-word poetry.

A further (fifth) criterion that one could consider adding would centre on the relevance or irrelevance of (individual, authorial) originality – a concept which is probably to be seen historically, as a persistent legacy of the Romantic movement, with its apotheotic celebration of genius. The artist, the author, as ‘I’ – as unique, distinct/ive and unmistakeable identity, the ultimate individualization. Against that, oral works often presuppose at least some degree of collective or group authorship. Historically, in Maori culture, according to Jane McRae:

‘Although the fame of certain composers lingered, compositions were not always attributed to individual authors because they were first and foremost vested in the public forum.’18 I think it is, however, fair to say that this feature of traditional oral performance has in many cases and in many ways morphed back into its opposite. A signal feature of contemporary spoken-word utterance and performance is the firm foregrounding of the individual performer telling their personal story, in and with their own personal voice – in what might perhaps at a pinch be seen

15See Ong 133.
17See Ong 161.
as the modern extrovert form of the personal diary. Not for nothing does powerpoetry.org advertise itself as being, representing, and giving a voice or voices to ‘the largest mobile/online teen poetry community’ (my emphasis).

From Aotearoa New Zealand to Polynesia – and back
Turning now to some practical examples (drawn from my own ‘field’, the Pacific, but, as I have already ventured to suggest, probably representative of a worldwide trend), I will attempt to trace a possible development from traditional oral poetry to spoken-word performance, drawing on poems by Maori authors still relying to various extents on traditional forms (Hone Tuwhare, Muru Walters and Apirana Taylor) – with Robert Sullivan as a link to the self-conscious use of modern media in the service of making meta-comments on what it is like to be a Maori in today’s world. These authors were writing within the overarching context of the Maori Renaissance, which took place within the latter half of the twentieth century. Over the last few decades, as covered in this paper, this dynamic has culminated in the creative fulcrum and momentum moving first from Aotearoa New Zealand to the Pacific Islands (Samoa, in particular) but then subsequently back again, in the wake of the general population flow patterns whereby so many Pacific Islanders live in New Zealand but commute on a regular basis between that mainland and their respective home islands to visit family and friends. This movement, initially triggered by economic factors, has resulted in a good deal of cultural cross-fertilization, with the emergence of female performers such as Sia Figiel, Tusiata Avia, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Courtney Sina Meredith (all with Samoan roots) pushing the envelope further and further.

The first poem I am going to look at is by Hone Tuwhare (1922–2008, b. Kaikohe, of Ngāpuhi descent):

Papa-tu-a-Nuku (Earth Mother)
We are stroking, caressing the spine
of the land.
We are massaging the ricked
back of the land
with our sore but ever-loving feet:
 hell, she loves it!
Squirming, the land wriggles
in delight.

We love her.

This formally very simple poem takes more or less literally the profoundly intimate relationship between human beings and the land they live on (tangata whenua) – between nation and mother earth – which is central to the holistic Maori world-view. The issue is, of course, related to the ongoing Treaty discourse already touched upon above. It grew out of a very specific background, a knowledge of which it presupposes in the listener, namely, the Land March of 1975 – ‘The Awakening,’ as it was known at the time –, organized by Maori activists in open

---

public protest against the way they had been consistently deprived of their most fundamental
indigenous land rights, which they were now claiming back. This impressive event was a classic
contemporary instance of a *hikoi* i.e. a protest march or parade traditionally involving a journey
taking days or weeks. A large-scale *hikoi* was staged in 2004 at the height of the ‘foreshore and
seabed controversy’ in opposition to Government plans to nationalize the New Zealand coastline –
a problematic project which in an only *apparently* democratic gesture would have made the
coastline accessible to all and sundry, thereby ‘relieving’ the Maori of their centuries-old
exclusive guardianship of the liminal littoral.

Both marches symbolically wound their way from the northernmost tip of the North Island
(Cape Reinga – itself a highly symbolic locus of Maori identity and continuous, unbroken
connection with the ancestors back in Hawaiki) to the Parliament Buildings (popularly known as
‘The Beehive’) in the Capital, Wellington. Within the framework of a modern Western-style
democracy, this protest effectively staged an *ur*-Maori way of physically, visibly, showing just
how devotedly attached the marchers were to the personified land to which they ancestrally
belong. In Maori culture, it is axiomatic that the people belong to the land; in Pakeha terms, the
land belongs to (the) people. The stark contrast between these two world views could hardly be
more graphically expressed than it is in Hone’s20 pared-back, compact poem, drawing as it does
on the traditional poetic imagery of Maori orality. Incidentally, though a Maori through and
through, Hone never wrote in his native ancestral language (which he had spoken at home up to
the age of around nine) but rather in English, of which he had a magisterial command in all its
registers and nuances.

The author of the next item, **Muru Walters** (*1935: Te Aupouri, Te Rarawa), is also a Maori
and also an activist. Unlike Hone, however, he composed his poem not only in traditional Maori
*style*, using a number of the rhetorical devices enshrined in the oral Maori tradition, but actually
*in Maori* (his first language) before producing his own English translation of the text. In several
other ways too his poem is a very different kettle of fish – starting with the most obvious and
considerable external difference, namely that of length (more than 40 lines to Hone’s slim
seven).

Muru’s poem was inspired by a major *cause célèbre* of the late 1970s and early 1980s, a
period when specific ecological, ecopolitical issues began to play an important part in Aotearoa
New Zealand and to be addressed in various *ecopoetic* ways, felicitously melding modern
European-style ecopolitics and traditional Maori stewardship of the environment. One of the first
of many such instances was the proposed construction of an aluminium smelter at Aramoana
(Maori for ‘the seagate’) Beach, a site of stunning natural beauty at the mouth of Otago Harbour
near Dunedin, South Island. This location also happens to be very close to the habitat of an
extremely rare royal albatross colony at Taiaroa Head, the only mainland breeding colony in the
world for the species, which was at risk of becoming an endangered and threatened species as a
direct consequence of environmental pollution. Quite apart from the threat posed by the wider,
indeed global, issue of nuclear and non-nuclear waste in the Pacific there was reason enough to
believe that the building of the plant might well result in a mass migration of these rare birds.

At least four New Zealand poets (three Pakeha authors: Cilla McQueen, Steve Thomas and
Ian Wedde; and the one Maori whose poem we are looking at now) wrote poems dealing with
the controversial subject of the Aramoana smelter, indeed expressly and openly directed against

---

20I am taking the liberty of adopting the common practice in Aotearoa New Zealand of referring to authors by their
first names.
it, using poetry as a medium for taking sides in the political debate. The poems and their respective approaches are individually quite different. Muru’s take on the issue comes across as a pastiche of a traditional Maori form, the haka explicitly referred to in the title, a form which has itself gone viral now that international rugby matches are globally televised (think Samoa vs. Aotearoa New Zealand) and which is a pre-eminent exemplar of a performance drawing on just about every paralinguistic device imaginable with the object of putting the fear of God into one’s enemies. Adopting and adapting this ancient ancestral tribal weapon allows the author to pull out all the stops in his onslaught on the foreign invaders who are polluting the land and threatening its natural order. A show of almost martial force. (It is a haka, after all...)

From the outset, the perspective of the poem is that of the putative future victim of the proposed construction – an albatross as protagonist, clearly identified as a rightful denizen of the region (Pukekura being the name of the albatross colony), just as much a natural part of the environment and ecology as a cloud in the sky and at the same time associated with the ancestral home of the Maori, namely Hawaiki. The literal bird’s-eye view enables the listener to perceive in its entirety the endangered site of outstanding natural beauty down there on the ground:

**Haka: he huruhuru toroa / Haka: the feathered albatross**

Like a cloud the feathered albatross
alights on the sumit of Pukekura
Aue! You came from the great Hawaiki
the lofty Hawaiki, the distant Hawaiki
Aue! From a world of orphans, from a world deserted
you have returned to embrace
your homeland.
To your confiscated homeland
Remaining in shame! Remaining bare! (ll. 1–9)

No words are minced, no prisoners taken, in this full-frontal attack:

Witnessing great foreigners!
Lofty foreigners! Distant foreigners!
Aue! Polluting
our land (ll. 21–23)

A notable feature of the poem is the frequent reinforcing repetition (a time-honoured rhetorical device in the Maori oral tradition) – sometimes of individual words:

Look! Look! Look!
Look! Look! (ll. 24–25)

flying here
flying here (ll. 27–28)

---

By Koputai!
By Koputai! (ll. 33–34)²²

– sometimes of structures (syntactic ‘chiming’):

(…) From a world of orphans, from a world deserted (l.5)
Remaining in shame! Remaining bare! (l.9)
Great albatross! Lofty albatross!
Flying albatross! Distant albatross! (ll. 12–13)

A time of intense darkness!
A time of intense sadness! (ll.15–16)

(…) Great darkness! Deep darkness! (l.19)

The next poem – by Apirana Taylor (*1955), who is of Pakeha and Maori (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, Ngāti Porou, Taranaki) descent – does not revolve around (principally human) threats to the natural environment but rather articulates threats to the marginalized, deracinated and detribalized indigenous individual posed by the built and social environment:

**Sad joke on a marae**
Tihei Mauriora I called
Kupe Paikea Te Kooti
Rewi and Te Rauparaha
I saw them
grim death and wooden ghosts
carved on the meeting house wall

In the only Maori I knew
I called
Tihei Mauriora
Above me the tekoteko raged
He ripped his tongue from his mouth
and threw it at my feet

Then I spoke
My name is Tu the freezing worker
Ngati D.B. is my tribe
The pub is my marae
My fist is my taiaha
Jail is my home

---

²²Koputai is the original Maori name (literally ‘the stomach of the tide’) of the place dubbed Port Chalmers by the British colonizers (and, before that, of the beach off Aramoana, at the comparatively narrow entrance to Otago Harbour).
Tihei Mauriora I cried
They understood
the tekoteko and the ghosts
though I said nothing but
Tihei Mauriora
for that’s all I knew23

As in the same author’s ‘Taiaha haka poem’24, which searingly evokes the sad spectacle of an erstwhile Maori warrior stripped of his mana – the dignity and self-esteem traditionally guaranteed by his membership of the tribe –, the speaker here too is only just managing to choke back his frustration and impotent rage. What might still have been pent-up in the case of Muru Walters’ haka, is scarcely containable in this poem. I was once privileged to hear and see it performed by the author in person25 – and what an impressively powerful, toweringly emotional performance it was: full of pity and fear, sound and fury – and signifying everything.

Paul Millar remarks on ‘the poignant intensity of Tu – a casualty of colonialism and Maori urban drift – reciting his whakapapa’ and then goes on to quote Peter Simpson’s judgment that Apirana’s ‘raw, powerful and angry poems (present) a Maori voice utterly different from the lyricism and gentle ironies of Hone Tuwhare.26 The whakapapa (the genealogy of one’s ancestors) as performed on the marae (the ancestral, tribal meeting-ground of the community) is the age-old vehicle of the oral tradition (especially in the word’s etymological sense of a ‘handing on’) for establishing one’s credentials, one’s indivisible identity as the link between past and present. Linking up with the continuous present of the Maori consciousness by enunciating the names of one’s ancestors and antecedents, those that have gone before, it is the existential oral act par excellence in the Maori cultural repertoire.

In this poem, the speaker’s link to that continuity has been broken – it is ruptured. The ancestral language of the old incantations has become an empty shell, deprived of its magic and the associated power, reduced to the stark staccato of ‘X, I said’ (ll.1, 8, 13, 19, 22). The poem’s speaker (who really is a speaker in the full sense of the word) is going through the linguistic motions, repeating phrases emptied of their original meaning. They are hollow and without resonance; withered, stunted and atrophied. Images of impotence prevail. The langue remains, the speaker’s parole is powerless. Not only is the warrior no longer required to wage war – the speaker can hardly speak, his linguistic competence having been reduced to a few syllables: ‘the only Maori I knew’ (l.7). Mind you, the only Maori he knows just happens to be a highly significant piece of Maori – ‘meta-Maori’, so to speak – namely the formula ‘Tihei Mauriora’ already discussed above in the quotation from Mauri Ola,27 a speech act by which permission to speak is sought.

27At footnote 8, above.

Peter H. Marsden. ‘Oral Goes Viral – Reversing the Print Revolution.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
What Apirana is voicing here is the *de profundis clamavi* (Psalm 130) of the modern urban, deracinated Maori who, having lost touch with his roots, is left with only a vestigial competence in his supposedly native language. The proud warrior has been reduced to a cypher, a cog in the wheel of the white man’s economic system, working in a soul- and body-destroying job, performing meaningless repetitive work, symbolically enough, on a conveyor belt in the meat factory (shades of Marxist alienation or of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* – minus the humour). The only affiliation remaining is his membership of the bogus modern tribe (*Ngati*) of beer-drinkers.\(^{28}\) It is a sadly well-known fact that alcohol was ‘introduced’ to the country by the colonizing Pakeha, as one of the fruits of European ‘civilization’. The sole reaction to Tu’s plight is that the symbolic carved ancestral warrior on the meeting-house wall symbolically enough deprives himself of language by ripping out his *tongue*.

The next poem – by yet another, again quite different, Maori author, Robert Sullivan (*1967*) – also deals with culture clash, the suppression of cultural ties, and the plight of the (partially) bilingual, bicultural individual attempting a balancing act between his two sets of roots. But the tone is markedly different, less strident, calmer, musing. No anger here, no righteous indignation, no helpless desperate rage – more a calm, reasonable, patient voice and presence. Of Ngāpuhi and Galway Irish descent, Robert Sullivan grew up in Mangere, South Auckland. He was for quite some time an academic librarian in charge of rare books – a professional guardian of that Pakeha icon, the printed page – who in his own ‘writings’ nevertheless strives to uphold the (albeit modified) oral tradition while also modifying it himself. Significantly, considering that his country is officially bicultural, Robert Sullivan describes himself as ‘*multicultural*’:

**Te Hokinga Mai**  
Tena ra koutou. We’re hiring  
a video camera to film our powhiri

at the marae on Monday. I’m busy practising  
waiaata, the hardest is ‘tangi a te ruru . . . ’

I’ve been practising hard to remember not only  
to greet the meeting house, the marae and my iwi,

but to point to each as I speak, and to sound  
as natural as possible. Nan tells me not

to drag out words, that I’m over-pronounced.  
It’s koh-rua, not caw-rua, for instance.\(^{29}\)

I saw a video entitled *How d’ya do Mr Governor*  
with a lot of different people saying a lot

---

\(^{28}\)DB is one of New Zealand’s most popular brands of beer.  
\(^{29}\)A language-learner’s typical hypercorrection, perhaps? (The mispronounced phrase means: ‘You two./The two of you.’).

Peter H. Marsden. ‘Oral Goes Viral – Reversing the Print Revolution.’  
of different things about the Treaty. One
of the panel said the Maori way of looking
at the world was that we are who we are because
of our past, and that we take that into the future.\(^{30}\)

Here the two cultures and languages are not tearing the individual apart, they come across more
as a mutually enriching duality, twin strands of identity that are being carefully and caringly
knitted together (again), capable of culturally and linguistically enriching the individual and
making her/him whole (again). The tone is conciliatory, constructive rather than destructive:
upbeat, not downcast. Nevertheless, the tension between the two forces is expressed in
(linguistic) fragmentation; indeed, language itself is clearly a recurring, dominant, key theme in
many of these poems. Here we see and hear a man re-learning his native language, going back to
his cultural and linguistic roots, as a vital and indispensable means of regaining his inner
balance. This has the flavour of a coming-out, or a spiritual re-birth. At the same time, the
speaker is a thoroughly ‘modern’ Maori, a plugged-in, clued-up denizen of the electronically
technologized world, who can observe in an arrestingly matter-of-fact way that: ‘We’re hiring a
video camera to film / our powhiri at the marae on Monday.’ (II.1–2) Robert’s style is demotic,
casual-conversational – by contrast with, say, the lyricality of Hone, or the rhetoric of Muru, let
alone the polemics of Apirana.

Those familiar with Maori cultural practices will need no reminder that the culture possesses
a rich repertoire of ritual ceremonies of welcoming and encounter, each with its own distinct
function, which includes not only the powhiri but also the hokinga of the poem’s title and the
Tena ra koutou of the first line along with such concepts as kia ora, haere mai and mihi. It was
all in place aeons before a neo-European phenomenon called Willkommenskultur hit the world’s
headlines. ‘Go to New Zealand to be greeted!’ – to slightly modify Billy Crystal’s memorable
Oscar message. In fact, you don’t even have to be a person in order to be greeted: ‘remember …
/ to greet the meeting house’ (II.5–6). After all, according to Maori tradition, the tree you want to
cut down in order to build a canoe or waka has at least to be asked for permission first.

The poem is not just about learning to speak – it is also about learning to use new ways of
making that speech widely available, retrieveable. Authentic indigenous practices, ceremonies
and rituals (the living essence of maoritanga) that have been traditionally transmitted orally can
be accurately and authentically recorded for posterity using state-of-the-art electronic equipment
rather than the technology of the print era – a living exemplification of the axiomatic Maori
world view enunciated in the concluding couplet of the poem (‘we are who we are because / of
our past, and …we take that into the future’ – II.15–16). The wheel has come almost full circle.
Ironically enough, the new post-print tools primarily developed by the Pakeha ascendancy can,
by capturing those all-important paralinguistic dimensions of actual delivery (gesture, facial
expression, body language), facilitate a superior preservation of indigenous folkways. In this
poem, Robert Sullivan is not so much performing Maoritanga as writing about performance-in-
context, making a meta-statement about how such performances may be recorded and
disseminated. His lines seem almost prophetic, heralding the promise of a new era in which the
spread of orality is to become an everyday phenomenon. Pioneering words! It’s no surprise to

Ellipsis (including spacing) in original. The book’s title is Maori for ‘climb!’.
find him in later work – e.g. *STAR WAKA* (1999) – dropping casual references to emailing, the internet and IT terminology.

Robert’s conceit marks a breakthrough, a paradigm change, which has in the meantime led to an increasingly liberating, enabling, facilitating, empowering, democratizing force of the internet in, and for, the Maori community. Granted, many still don’t have access to it, but millions more do than only a few decades ago, say. If a powhiri can be videoed (without violating *tapu*), then why not a poem? And if it is filmed now, it will no longer be done as it would have been done twenty-odd years ago, with a hand-held camera containing a video cassette to be taken home and inserted in a VCR (the most recent – *used-to-be* state-of-the-art – gizmo to hit the obsolescence scene). No, you will just point your smartphone at the proceedings and then instantly share the product with the (rest of the) world. The Third Industrial Revolution\(^3\) (the digital one) is, among many other things, making individual performance in all its facets and three-dimensionality universally recordable and infinitely re-play-able. Oral works of art too have long since attained the age of their full technological (audiovisual, contextual-situational) reproducibility, to invoke Walter Benjamin. What a productive cross-fertilization between the old and the new! All dimensions of the authentic original event (acoustic, visual, behavioural-paralinguistic) performed by the author can be transmitted faithfully and instantaneously in ultra-naturalistic form (what you get is what you would have seen had you been there) to a (potentially) global audience in the global village sitting in front of the global computer screen in the comfort and privacy of their own abode. Authors can thus almost literally take their work into the audience’s home (the stated aim of many a TV programme back in the 1950s and -60s), thereby enabling virtual but nevertheless personal, individual interaction of a hitherto unprecedented intensity.

Yes, indeed – the Gutenberg Galaxy is inexorably heading off into the black holes of outer space. Language can be transmitted (by the sender) without the need for it to be consciously and actively decoded by the receiver. The actual process of mediatization has become so effective and efficient and operates with such technological perfection below the surface of our consciousness that we scarcely notice that most, if not all, of the encoding is now done by the programmers and algorithmists – invisibly to the end-user, who does not need to, used to have to, but these days rarely ever has, a command of the code. They do not even have to learn a new alphabet. The message is no longer passed through the filter of abstract symbols, marks on the page etc. User-friendly – for both performer and audience. Using, in the spirit of the times, i.e. electronic-digital. Moving with the times, going with the flow – going viral!

All of which lends a whole new dimension to the concept of the digital native. In fact, one might well be tempted to go one further and decide to call these cutting-edge wordsmiths ‘digital indigenes’\(^3\). It strikes me as a particularly felicitous completion of the full circuit of the wheel that while the Australian Aborigines have been using message sticks for millennia, we Westerners can now, after a mere fifty thousand years have elapsed, put our messages on a stick too. If that’s not progress…

Moreover, orality lends itself to the addressing of topics of crucial interest to indigenous people/s – e.g. eco-issues. (cf. powerpoetry.org, above). A new – almost universally available


and accessible – vehicle of empowerment for the oppressed and marginalized, whether indigenous or not: (a) because they are very often most directly affected by outside projects invading their ancestral space or territory, and (b) because this medium is the traditional vehicle for transmitting the voice of a community, particularly when it is threatened, oppressed, suppressed – or marginalized. Voices from the margins indeed!

Talking about margins, it’s now high time to turn the spotlight on the growing role that women are playing in this new development. After tentative beginnings and first stirrings, they are actually spearheading it. They have really come to the fore and into their own under the unofficial banner of (The) Niu Wave and Pasifika Poetry. This is where women have in recent years started to dominate the performance scene, hitting the spoken-word platforms and forums big-time, very often doing so from a feminist point of view with a strong gender agenda, writing typically with a ‘post’-colonial or anti-colonial focus, for instance about the way colonized women were treated by colonizers (doubly colonized, in effect), the introduction of STDs and other boons of Western ‘civilization’. Given this scenario, it comes as no surprise to discover a poem by Selina Tusitala Marsh entitled ‘Realpolitik’.33

With conspicuous frequency, these women writers are Oceanian/Polynesian/Pacific Islanders (‘PI’s) – and, especially often, specifically Samoan – in origin. Samoan literature is rapidly becoming more than merely a one-man show, although there are very many Samoans – male and female – writing today who will only too readily declare their debt to Albert Wendt’s singular pathbreaking role in putting their country of origin on the map. The increasing Samoan dominance in this area may well be reflecting a wider demographic pattern. For quite some time Auckland has enjoyed the statistical distinction of being the biggest Polynesian city (‘in the world,’ to add the Guinness-Book-of-Records dimension) in the sense that there are more people with a Polynesian background living in Auckland than in Polynesia itself. It would seem that Samoans not only constitute the single largest Polynesian group in New Zealand – there are almost as many Samoans living there as the entire current population of Samoa itself (200,000) – but that Samoans are also ‘disproportionately’ represented in the world of spoken-word utterance.34

In her ‘Songs of the fat brown woman’ Sia Figiel (*1967, b. Apia), explicitly aligns herself with a transoceanic sisterhood, saluting another woman writer from a different, geographically very distant culture with whom she declares her solidarity in the dedication of this sequence of poems: ‘for sista grace (nichols) and the fat black woman’(my emphasis). Grace Nichols (*1950, b. Georgetown. Guyana; UK 1977–), who after her debut volume: I is a Long-Memoried Woman (1983) had gone on to create The Fat Black Woman’s Poems (1984). Here we have a typical example of an emerging author already forming and forging her own frames of reference within – or across – the margins, drawing strength and self-confidence from the knowledge that (Pacific) Islanders are not necessarily isolated.

Tusiata Avia (*1966, b. Christchurch), of Samoan and Palagi descent, caused quite a furore touring with her solo show Wild Dogs Under My Skirt (2002) and then with the more

33Marsh 43.
34In their first anthology of Polynesian poems in English – Whetu Moana (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003) – the editors Albert Wendt, Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan feature work by 72 poets from seven countries of origin. Almost a third of these are from Samoa. – the largest single group after the Maori contingent.
conventional publication of a volume of poetry with the same title two years later.\textsuperscript{36} No compliant dusky maiden, she. On the contrary, a robustly independent modern young woman, confident in her female sensuality and sexuality – a phenomenon most effectively underlined by her live performance of the piece. Neither poem nor performance would appear designed to make an audience relax back into their seats – particularly a male audience, should they be bold and brave enough to take up the challenge of attendance. The performer’s provocative in-your-face stance constitutes an articulate denial of all the Western/European/colonizing heterosexual male stereotypes of Samoan women and what they are – or are not – allowed to do or say. This is how the title poem of the collection begins:

\begin{quote}
I want to tattoo my legs. \\
Not blue or green \\
but black. (ll.1–3)
\end{quote}

It goes on like this:

\begin{quote}
I want my legs as sharp as dogs’ teeth \\
wild dogs \\
wild Samoan dogs \\
the mangy kind that bite strangers. (ll.1–19)
\end{quote}

And this is how it ends:

\begin{quote}
I want to frighten my lovers \\
let them sit across from me \\
and whistle through their teeth. (ll.30–32)\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Selina Tusitala Marsh} (*1971, b. Auckland) is of Samoan, Tuvuluan, English, Scottish and French descent. Her volume \textit{fast talking PI} (2009) includes the long title poem from which I have already quoted. It consists of 44 three-line stanzas (plus one stanza of four lines and two of five, as well as a concluding 33-liner), marked by rap-ish repetition – of words and structures. The fast talking this poem performs with such panache is a fireworks of verbal facility – a confident, punchy, up-front telling of it like it is. Satirically-sarcastically-sassily, the speaker reels off a seemingly never-ending catalogue of Polynesian self-definitions – in brilliant defiance of the usual simplistic, reductive, formulaically othering generalizations of the ‘All Samoans are lazy, incompetent overstayers’\textsuperscript{38} type which are sadly all too common in the context of the uneasy New Zealand–Polynesian symbiosis:\textsuperscript{39}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{37}Avia 65–66.
\end{quote}
I’m a fast talkin’ PI
I’m a power walkin’ PI
I’m a demographic, hieroglyphic fact-sheetin’ PI

I’m a theorizing PI
I’m a strategizing PI
I’m a published in a peer review journal PI

I’m a slot machine PI
I’m a lotto queen PI
I’m a tote-ticket church bingo TAB PI

I’m a vegan PI
a rainbow warrior PI
I’m a protest sign against the rising waters PI

I’m a criminal PI
behind the bar graphs PI
I’m a gun smokin’ patchin’ totin’ king cobra PI

I’m a fale PI
I’m a marae PI
I’m a living breathing dwelling of my ancestors PI

I’m a lazy PI
I’m a p-crazy PI
I’m a hard drinkin’ hard speakin’ where my eggs? PI

(etc etc etc)40

The target strikes back, as it were. Fed up with being defined by others, with being at the receiving end of the marginalization-reinforcing ‘us–them’ stereotypes, the speaker proactively takes the floor and seize the right to speak for herself, in the first person – of whom there are many. Inventively ringing the lexical changes while the syntax retains the same subject-copula-complement structure, she (or they – the ‘I’ might just as well stand for a different first person in every line) kaleidoscopically conjugate(s) the entire spectrum that being a member of any group can represent regardless of that group’s ethnicity – thereby multiply re-defining what it is to be a PI: You name it, she is it. – Well, actually she names it! The speaker is empowering herself with the spoken word. Unsurprisingly, it turns out that a PI can at the same time be anything and many things: scholarly and/or down-to-earth, political and/or personal, traditionalist and/or trendy, serious and/or fun-loving, refined and/or vulgar, lazy and/or hard-working. In other words, a PI can be just as individual and complex as a member of any other ethnic group; PIs collectively can be as different and life-spicingly various as any other group of human beings.

40Marsh 58.
In this Whitmanesque song of herself, Selina celebrates the co-existence within any human being of the unique and the universal. She convincingly and persuasively demonstrates that, like anybody else, a PI can ‘contain (marginalized) multitudes,’ of whom she as poet is the ‘tongue’ – to whom she, as ventriloquist, lends her powerful creative voice. Selina here unfolds a veritable panoply, she spouts forth a cornucopia of counter-stereotypes with which she bombards those who usually throw the verbal projectiles and brickbats. To quote Morecambe and Wise, there’s no answer to that.

Last but by no means least in this formidable new wave of feisty female performance poets we have Courtame Sina Meredith (*1986), born in New Zealand of Samoan, Mangaian41 and Irish descent. As a reaction against the ethnic descriptor ‘Afakasi’42 (=‘half-caste’), commonly used in Samoa but regarded by many as a racial slur, she defines herself as an ‘urbanesian’ (urban Polynesian). Courtney characterizes her writing as an ‘ongoing discussion of contemporary urban life with an underlying Pacific politique’.43 Her first book of poetry, Brown Girls in Red Lipstick (2012), launched at the Frankfurt Book Fair, includes a poem entitled ‘Don’t trust a Samoan Girl,’ in which the speaker states: ‘The girls all lie, they lie like me,’ thereby invoking that age-old paradox traditionally connected with another island, in another hemisphere.

This vibrant new author has received a glowing accolade from Robert Sullivan, who is quoted on her website characterizing her as:

a leader of the new generation of writers and performance artists gracing our poetry ...

Through her absorption of Berlin’s high and low literary culture, her roots in the Auckland Samoan diaspora, and her familiarity with world Polynesian writing, she brings together an edgy singer’s strength, wry insights, sensual material, beautiful shards, blood and breath, monsoons, and glistening water.44

Courtney has performed before the German President and the British House of Lords. Selina, in her capacity as Commonwealth Poet for the year 2016 (already a signal distinction), has performed before Queen and Parliament on Commonwealth Day.45 These two authors have thereby inaugurated a long literary march through the institutions. One can only hope that such milestones amount to more than mere political symbolism and that they reflect true recognition of the power of Polynesian spoken-word poetry by the powers-that-be (and that still continue to be), that this boldly not going in awe of authority or establishment, this self-confidence in the presence of the high and mighty, is not being killed softly with kindness, that these poets are not being instrumentalised, or even misused, as court performers.

---
41Mangaia is the most southerly of the Cook Islands and the second largest, after Rarotonga.
42In her poem ‘afa kasi’ – Whetu Moana (2003) 133 – Selina Tusitala Marsh deconstructs the notion to great effect.
43Courtame Sina Meredith’ Courtney Sina Meredith no editor, place or date of publication. 12 December 2016 https://courtame Meredith.com.
To close on the upbeat: We’re talking about authors who have made it from the margins to the centres, if not into the actual corridors, of power. They possess not only self-confidence but also considerable self-empowering ‘oral cred’. Thanks to the immense immediate impact made by modern digital-electronic media, they have been able to make their voices heard from the margins. It is gratifying and uplifting to see and to hear that poetry is playing its rightful part in that ongoing process.

Born in the UK, Peter H. Marsden read Modern Languages, with a special emphasis on German language and literature, at the Universities of Oxford, London and Manchester. Relocating to Germany, he spent most of his working life as a lecturer in the English Department at Aachen University of Technology – a post from which he retired in 2007. His research interests encompass linguistics (varieties of English, bilingualism, translation studies) as well as literature, with a particular focus on Australian, New Zealand and Irish poetry. He has published on the oral tradition in Aboriginal and Maori writing as well as on individual authors including Peter Bland, Peter Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Robert Sullivan and Hone Tuwhare. A long-term project on literary relations between Germany and New Zealand continues to be ongoing and open-ended.

Works Cited

Primary Texts


Figiel, Sia. ‘Songs of the Fat Brown Woman,’ *Whetu Moana* eds. Albert Wendt *et al.* (see below under Wendt), 2003, 60–63. Print.


Secondary Texts


‘If you don’t learn to write your own life story, someone else will write it for you,’ Power Poetry. No editor, place or date of publication. Web. 06 December 2016 <http://www.powerpoetry.org>.


**Further Reading**


Jamaica Osorio’s Indigenous Poetics as a Challenge to Global Hybridity
Emma Scanlan
University of Sussex, UK

Abstract

Speaking at a TEDx event in Manoa, Oʻahu in 2013 kanaka maoli (Native Hawaiian) poet Jamaica Osorio declaimed ‘Global warming will break the foundation of the community/without even shaking the penthouse suits/ whilst the men and women who finance the earth’s deterioration/play the role of its saviour … tallying the brown bodies that float by.’

In this article I introduce Osorio’s poetry as an example of indigenous ecocriticism interacting with global power flows as she astutely pinpoints an asymmetry of causation and impact dictated by economic and racial power. Her anger is rooted in her genealogy as a kanaka maoli woman, an American citizen, a queer poet and indigenous activist. Kānaka maoli trace their genealogy back to the islands of Hawai‘i, and make little distinction between human and non-human family; many feel real fury at the environmental destruction capitalist-driven development has wreaked on their islands.

Historian Arif Dirlik posited that indigenous epistemologies ‘assume strategic significance’ as ‘counter resolutions to the contradictions of hybridity’. I suggest that Osorio’s career is metonymic of the techniques kānaka maoli have used for centuries to ensure cultural survival; remaining rooted in place whilst working to build audiences and allies internationally. Osorio’s poetry performances, watched on YouTube by thousands of people across the world, provide a lens through which contemporary indigeneity can be observed re-placing itself, using international networks, in a national system which continues to privilege movement over fixity regardless of the cost to the places it moves between.

* * * * *

On 27 February 2010 Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio was at university in Stanford, California as a tsunami warning sounded in her hometown of Honolulu. An 8.8 magnitude earthquake had hit Chile and 35 cities on the Pacific coast were on alert. Waiting in safety, knowing that a tsunami in Hawai‘i could destroy Honolulu, Osorio wrote the poem ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’.1

Osorio is a Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian)2 poet and activist raised in the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement and ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is a Slam poem she performed at the 2010 Brave New Voices ‘Speak Green’ competition in Los Angeles. This article uses ‘Day 223:

---


2 In this article I use Kanaka Maoli and Native Hawaiian interchangeably. ‘Kanaka’ is singular and denotes a person, whilst ‘Maoli’ translates as ‘real’, and is a term that emphasises indigeneity to Hawai‘i. ‘Kānaka’, with the kahakō, or macron, is plural. I am aware of the sociopolitical nuances of ‘Native’ and ‘indigenous’, both of which I use synonymously, as well as ‘Hawaiian’, which I use to denote nationality as opposed to ethnicity, but at all times to refer to people who are genealogically connected to the independent nation of Hawai‘i prior to its occupation by the USA.

Emma Scanlan. ‘Jamaica Osorio’s Indigenous Poetics as a Challenge to Global Hybridity.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
Sinking Bodies’ to explore the effectiveness of ecocriticism as a framework for analysing poetry by indigenous writers, and demonstrates how Osorio’s poem is rooted in specific Native Hawaiian cultural imperatives. Osorio strategically occupies an essentialist position relative to the violent forces the poem condemns in order to challenge notions of global hybridity that threaten indigenous sovereignty. In doing so, she marks the poem as politically as well as culturally motivated. As a poet raised in a highly political milieu, with strong Hawaiian nationalist sentiments, Osorio adopts a provocative voice in ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ that simultaneously highlights, laments and denounces the intersections of environmental, economic and racial violence in Hawai‘i.  

Although provoked by the Chilean earthquake, ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ draws together apparently disparate phenomena, such as economic exploitation, environmental degradation, global warming and institutionalised racism, in a wider critique of interlocking power structures. Osorio creates poetic synapses through evocative metaphors where apparently separate social and environmental inequalities exchange meaning in ways that make perceptible their shared source. Whilst Osorio is not aiming to unify her themes, and indeed they remain tangled rather than imbricated, she provocatively highlights the points of contact where large, recognised injustices, such as war and racism, snag on more invisible, insidious forms of violence, such as global warming and educational inequality. In doing so, she connects issues that Norwegian sociologist and mathematician Johan Galtung terms ‘structural violence’, that is hierarchical social frameworks designed to control personal violence, with the kind of environmental degradation ecocritical writer Rob Nixon terms ‘slow violence’; and she does so within a Native Hawaiian context.

Nixon, in his seminal work, formulates ‘slow violence’ as the indirect, bloodless, unseen forms of death visited on wide, often poor, areas of the globe by the industry and wars of wealthy nations, corporations, organisations and individuals through phenomena such as chemical poisoning, famine and drought. The effects of these activities are often so temporally and spatially removed from their causes that they are not properly attributed and thus regularly remain unreported, unstudied and unpunished. Nixon proposes that,

in a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. … The narrative imaginings of writer-activists may thus offer us a different kind of witnessing: of sights unseen. (15)

Writer-activists can contribute to social memory by testifying to events that are too temporally spread to be held in inter-generational memory. Literature can draw swift connections that are difficult to demonstrate in life due to the nature of slow violence and the people on whom it tends to be inflicted: the poor, the uneducated, women and racial minorities.

3 Osorio is a part of a lineage of writers whose resistance to the overthrow of their monarchy has been ongoing since the close of the nineteenth century. Writer-activism, which was repressed in the years of the second World War and leading up to statehood in 1959, re-emerged following Hawai‘i’s accession to the Union. In under a decade it had formed into an outpouring of cultural activity that is now considered a Renaissance. Poetry forms one part of a multi-faceted movement, but it is a vocal and vibrant source of resistance for Hawaiians.


‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ maps the web of injustices and violence that are perceived as unconnected because of the separation of cause and effect over time and distance. Using the Chilean earthquake as a stimulus, Osorio explicitly links the effects of climate change with racism, militarism and educational inequality. In this sense, ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is an ecocritical poem that fits well with Nixon’s formulation of writer-activist production, however ecocriticism does not fully account for Osorio’s influences and political aims, which are locally as well as globally focussed.

A reading of Native Hawaiian poetry only in terms of ecocriticism does not take into account that Native Hawaiians’ ecological consciousness is rooted in cultural connectedness to the ‘āina⁶ (earth). The kānaka maoli relationship with their environment is familial — in Hawaiian religion all Native Hawaiians are descended from the taro plant, and most elements, flora and fauna are associated with humans via family relationships. In contrast, ecocriticism is predominantly a movement from within Western thought that aims to redirect the ‘historically egocentric Western imagination toward a newly emerging ecocentric paradigm.’⁷ That is, ecocriticism offers a strategy to engage in ‘an ethical inquiry into the connections between self, society, environment and text.’⁸ In this sense Osorio’s, and many other Native Hawaiian poets’ work, is ecocritical. However, kānaka maoli writers, who might otherwise be described as ecopoetic, are writing from within, rather than against, a cultural position; their tradition is not ‘historically egocentric.’ Aloha ‘āina, which means love of the land in Hawaiian, is one expression of the fundamental genealogical relationship between Hawaiians and Hawai‘i. Native Hawaiian writers who take what appears to be an environmental stance, whether or not they explicitly lay claim to their specific cultural heritage, are deeply embedded in their particular cultural and political milieu.⁹

It is at this point when some ecocritical labels, particularly regarding ecopoetics, become inappropriate for Native Hawaiian poets more generally and Osorio particularly. Dictums such as Bate’s, that ‘ecopoetics must concern itself with consciousness. When it comes to practice, we have to speak in other discourses,’¹⁰ does not easily accommodate writer-activists who are concerned with both consciousness and practice. Osorio’s writing is most particularly concerned with practice, with activism and with indigenous nationalism. Her expressions of dismay at environmental degradation are not laments for a pristine earth free from human interference, but a strategic call for cultural amelioration, rooted in the belief that indigenous knowledge can contribute to the continuation of a human existence more in harmony with specific local environments. The distinction often made in ecocriticism between the ‘rich nation environmentalism’ of the north and the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ in the global south often leaves out indigenous populations, such as Native Hawaiians, who live within the borders of

---

⁶ I have not italicised Hawaiian words because they are not foreign or ‘other’ to the poet, text or context discussed here. Modern spellings are used, selected from Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert. Hawaiian Dictionary: Hawaiian-English, English-Hawaiian, Rev. and Enl. Ed edition. (Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 1986).
⁸ Lemmer, 225.
⁹ Aloha ʻāina can be translated as ‘patriotism’ and has been a rallying call for anti-settler colonial struggles since the nineteenth century. Trask explains that aloha ʻāina is a responsibility to reciprocity: the land feeds humans who, in return, care for it. The saying has become political only by virtue of American settler colonialism, which seeks to disconnect Native Hawaiians from the land to legitimise occupation. See Haunani-Kay Trask. From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999) 128.

those rich northern nations but through institutional disadvantage have not shared equally in their fellow citizens’ wealth. These peoples have also simultaneously had their culture, fundamentally tied to their landscape, stripped out from beneath them.\(^{11}\) Whilst acknowledging that modern ecocritical frameworks have value for explicating the symptoms ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ describes, and postcolonialism can offer incisive diagnoses of the underlying causes, its political potential as a strategically essentialist, indigenous work requires a different analytical focus.

Osorio’s writing is rooted in her Hawaiian culture in more specific, literary ways than may at first appear to a predominantly non-Hawaiian audience. Like much of her work, ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is able to simultaneously speak to multiple audiences, who have differing levels of Hawaiian cultural awareness.\(^{12}\) This is because a fundamental aspect of the Hawaiian language is kaona, which is a rhetorical device that encapsulates a number of poetic practices, such as allusion, metaphor, symbolism, and ‘hidden meanings.’\(^{13}\) Poetry, in the Western sense, is the closest literary form to the traditional Hawaiian mele (encompassing song, chant and poetry) and is most suited to the use of metaphor. Poetry is often a political medium for Hawaiian writers because its capacity to accommodate kaona enables them to both reveal and conceal meaning to different audiences. This allows varying levels of inclusion and exclusion according to the cultural awareness of the audience. McDougall and Nordstrom explain that:

> The expected role of the Hawaiian audience in this exchange is to look for and detect kaona in a composition so as to relate the numerous and varied allusions to their prior knowledge and experiences. In effect, those audience members who find the kaona and its meaning(s) are rewarded with a sense of exclusivity shared between the composer and all who ‘find’ the ‘hidden meaning,’ thereby receiving the ‘insider’ knowledge embedded within a composition. (101)

As ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ was originally composed as a Slam poem and performed live, the connection with the audience is paramount to the poem’s success. Slam is a competitive format that uses strict time parameters (three minutes) to compel the performer to engage their audience quickly. Techniques such as heightened vocal ranges in performance, the inclusion of song lyrics, rhyme, rhythm, and repetition help performers convey a message directly and emotively.\(^{14}\) As an accomplished Slam performer Osorio employs many of the recognisable rhetorical techniques of a Slam poem that are accessible to a wide audience, but also employs kaona in her work.

---

\(^{11}\) This form of displacement without crossing (official state/ national) borders is described by Nixon as ‘the loss of the land and resources beneath [people], a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable’ (19). Native Hawaiians suffered exactly this sort of displacement.

\(^{12}\) There is, of course, always a variation between the pre-existing knowledge of audience members, which becomes even more pronounced across global audiences connected via the internet, or international readerships. However, kaona accommodates relative variations in order to produce different connections with different audience members. A summary of this poetic practice, and the role of the audience in the production of kaona, can be found in Brandy Nālani McDougall and Georganne Nordstrom, ‘Ma Ka Hana Ka Brandy Nālani McDougall and Georganne Nordstrom, ‘Ma Ka Hana Ka’Ike (In the Work Is the Knowledge): Kaona as Rhetorical Action.’ College Composition and Communication 63.1 (2011): 100-101.


‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ doesn’t so much use kaona, as embody it. The poem is written and performed entirely in English, although Osorio is herself bilingual, and its social justice message, although illustrated with Hawaiian examples, is relevant to many Pacific, and other island, nations. However, Osorio makes several choices that embed kaona meanings with a particularly Hawaiian focus. The most prominent of these is the decision to frame the poem with lyrics remixed from the chorus of Maroon 5’s song ‘Harder to Breathe.’ In performance, the poem is prefaced with Osorio singing a slowed down, melancholic version of the song’s chorus. In print, the song lyrics are distinguished from the rest of the poem typographically:

When it gets cold outside and you got nobody to love
understand what I mean when I say there’s no way we are gonna give up
like a little girl cries in her bed at a monster who lives in her dream
is there anyone out there cuz it’s getting harder and harder to breathe (1-4)

Osorio’s selection and use of these lyrics works as a prescient opening to a poem about unseen, ‘monstrous’ forces affecting the planet. As the poem progresses and the scope of Osorio’s critique widens, most listeners/readers will be able to decipher that air pollution, rising sea levels and the threat of tsunamis all constitute a threat to free breathing. Each of these things are certainly one level of the poem’s meaning, but in Hawaiian culture breath and breathing hold particular kaona. Kunisue explains that an ‘Hawai’ian’s [sic] breath is expressed in the sound of ha, and the actual meaning is ‘breath of life’ or ‘divine breath.’ The word hā mimics the sound a breath makes, and is in this way onomatopoeic. Aloha, a famous Hawaiian word, whilst it has almost a hundred meanings, is built of alo and ha, which literally means ‘to be with/ to embrace the divine breath.’ One of the reasons performing poetry is so crucial for Hawaiian poets is because of the spiritual elements of sharing breath, voice and language. To share breath is to share a spiritual or living connection with a person. To give words breath that is intentional and purposeful is to imbue those words with life, and, crucially, to allow them to change the speaker. Within this context, it is clear that Osorio’s call for a more sensitive and long-term

---

16 This article refers to two recorded performances that can be accessed online. See Jamaica Osorio. ‘Sinking Bodies.’ YouTube. 16 October 2010. Accessed 20 March 2017, and ‘Poetry as translation: Jamaica Osorio at TEDxManoa.’ YouTube TEDx Talks, 28 October 2013. Accessed 20 March 2017.
17 As ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is now both recorded and published, it is available for an audience with less initial cultural knowledge to watch/read repeatedly, and, in principle, to uncover kaona for themselves. As a non-Hawaiian, this is my technique for analysing Osorio’s work. However, a performance poem’s effect is measured initially on the audience present, and their response can be mediated only via their immediate understanding of the poem, rather than meaning revealed later through study.

Whether or not the audience is Native Hawaiian, a certain level of knowledge of Native Hawaiian culture is necessary to look for and interpret kaona. In any performance or piece of writing the full kaona may be ‘known only to the raconteur and one or two special members of the audience . . . while everyone else remains oblivious to the message.’ Lilikalā K. Kame‘eleihiwa, ‘Introduction.’A Legendary Tradition of Kamapua’a: The Hawaiian Pig God trans. Kame‘eleihiwa. (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1996) ix.
19 Kunisue, 233.
20 Kanahele, 45.

approach to environmental policy is deeply embedded in her commitment to Native Hawaiian culture, which finds its expression through her political activism.

Noʻukahauʻoli Revilla, a poet and contemporary of Osorio’s, has explained her understanding that words themselves have the ability, when spoken with consideration and understanding, to alter the speaker — even if s/he did not originally compose them. Another Native Hawaiian poet, Brandy Nālani McDougall has written that,

... words have the power to actualize, to be either life giving or destructive. Words ... circulate in our communities, are repeated over and over, are empowered by belief and intention, and in turn, come to have mana and lives of their own. In particular, because the spoken word is transmitted ‘through the hā, or breath, we infuse mana into the sound, hence [empowering] the meaning or intent of the word.’

When the Hawaiian understanding of breath and breathing is made clear, Osorio’s lament that it is getting ‘harder and harder to breathe’ takes on a deeper and more distressing significance as a lament for cultural loss through environmental jeopardy. However, it also demonstrates how, for Native Hawaiians, to write and speak is to act in a way that has a tangible and physical effect on yourself and your community. Osorio’s resistance is closely connected to her place in the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement, which relies on, and nourishes, strong ties with the ‘āina (land) of Hawai‘i. For Osorio, being engaged in the project of writer-activism is to be engaged with a cultural heritage that she simultaneously performs and embodies.

‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is framed by the names of three countries, Haiti, Chile and Indonesia, that suffered earthquakes of varying severity in 2010. The earthquakes were both the inspiration for the poem and a suitable metaphor for its action. Earthquakes are sudden and violent events that are measurable and, to an extent, time-bound. They constitute an ‘event’ that attracts media and narrative attention, as attested to by the existence of ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’. However, like a poem, the lasting impact of an earthquake is much wider and more deeply felt in ways that are more difficult to measure, and rarely attract the same attention the original event (performance) garnered.

The lasting human impact of an earthquake is not only affected by geological differences but also by social, economic and political realities that affect the preparedness of the affected communities. The earthquake in Haiti, for example, has been described as an ‘unmitigated disaster’ in which nearly a quarter of a million people died – much higher than for quakes of similar magnitudes in other countries – yet the real death toll from disease, due to a systemic

21 Scanlan. Personal Interview, 20 March 2015.
23 Whilst an analysis of the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement is not the purpose of this article, it is worth noting that Native Hawaiian nationalism is neither monolithic nor has only ‘environmental justice’ as its motivation. For an overview of the main organisations working towards sovereignty see Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa, ‘Preface: Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement’ Islands in Captivity: The Record of the International Tribunal on the Rights of Indigenous Hawaiians, ’ ed. Ward Churchill and Sharon H. Venne (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2004) xvii-xxvii, particularly xx-xxi.
lack of adequate housing, healthcare and education, is much higher.\textsuperscript{24} In his analysis of violence Galtung explains that,

\begin{quote}
Violence is that which increases the distance between the potential [for violence] and the actual [violence experienced], and that which impedes the decrease of this distance. Thus … the case of people dying from earthquakes today would not warrant an analysis in terms of violence, but the day after tomorrow, when earthquakes may become avoidable, such deaths may be seen as the result of violence. (168-9)
\end{quote}

He notes that ‘structural violence’ is present in the avoidable differences between individuals’ and societies’ abilities to cope with and survive an earthquake.\textsuperscript{25} If a city is well-built, with strict building codes, and good quality materials, their citizens’ chances of survival are increased. Education, public awareness, health care, communications infrastructure, seismic monitoring, emergency response capabilities, and even exposure to foreign media all contribute to the likelihood of surviving an event like an earthquake.\textsuperscript{26} However, these factors, and more importantly the origins of their failings, are rarely taken into account when assessing the impact of natural disasters.

As Nixon suggests, the disconnect between the temporal measurement of an event and the true extent of its effects is in itself an act of representational bias that obscures systemic inequalities that contribute to the survival chances of communities hit by seismic and meteorological events.\textsuperscript{27} Towards the end of the poem Osorio argues that ‘there is nothing ‘natural’ about the way we have destroyed our planet’ (76), reading beyond the ‘natural disaster’ to insist that there is responsibility, and therefore need for remedial action, beyond the immediate, apparently politically neutral, disaster relief.

Osorio’s performance of ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ is a time-bound event (though infinitely repeatable through recordings), but contributes to a broader discourse on climate change (globally), rising sea levels (particularly in the Pacific), political apathy, racism and educational underfunding (in the USA and, in particular, Hawai‘i). However, Osorio manages to retain specificity to Hawai‘i that avoids rhetorical redundancy and retains the poem’s emotive power. The potential of such creative discourse to alter the outcome of current trends in environmental policy remains unmeasured (and perhaps unmeasurable), but by framing her protest with these particular earthquakes Osorio captures the energy of the immediate disaster and uses it to illuminate the darker corners of state and national violence, particularly with regard to Native Hawaiians.

The description of the earthquake itself sets up the us/ them binary that forms the crux of the poem’s protest:

\begin{quote}
They call this Global Warming
the climate correcting itself
I call it earth rattling
\end{quote}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Galtung} Galtung, n.3 186-7.
\bibitem{Castaños and Lomnitz2} Castaños and Lomnitz, 43-44.
\bibitem{Nixon} Nixon, 13.
\end{thebibliography}
quaking
plates shifting
tsunami lifting
the sea is rising (17-25)

By taking the impersonal language of science and invoking the pseudo-omniscient ‘they,’ familiar to readers of mainstream media reports of scientific research, Osorio forms a contrast with the consonantal experience of the ‘I’ in an earthquake. By capitalising ‘Global Warming,’ Osorio directs the poem, at least obliquely, at both scientists and global warming deniers, pointing out that those involved in the political and scientific debates are rarely those on the front line of climate change and its devastating impacts.

Utilising the full capability of poetry to make connections swiftly she continues:

brown bodies are born asthmatic choking from first inhale
running from an aquatic mountain
it is no wonder we cannot breathe (30-32)

Here, Osorio introduces the racialisation of suffering, iterating that ‘brown bodies’ are born at a disadvantage. Native Hawaiians have devastatingly low health outcomes compared to people of Japanese, Chinese or white ancestry. By speaking of ‘brown bodies,’ Osorio is exposing the racial dimension of ignorance/ being ignored, and deliberately conflates economic and racial marginalisation with the impact of globalisation and militarism on Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders:

unloading our brown bodies over seas to fight ‘terrorism’ will not lighten our island enough to keep it afloat (68-69)

These lines are an adept play on words that point towards the disproportionately large number of Native Hawaiians who enter the US military services. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (who are often considered together for statistical analysis) are overrepresented by 249% in relation to population proportion – a situation that is deeply related to institutional racism, entrenched indigenous economic disadvantage and cultural degradation – and one that is broadly congruent across the United States.

By forming relationships between ostensibly disparate problems Osorio allows the audience to deepen the connections according to their knowledge of specific local events. Making full use of the word ‘light’s homonymic potential, Osorio references the US’s assimilationist policies directed at Native Hawaiians, and the net immigration of haole (Caucasian) Americans to

29 For an analysis of the political implications of this conflation of Hawaiian and Pacific Islander see Lisa Kahaleole Hall. ‘Which of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders Are Not Asian Americans, and All Pacific Islanders Are Not Hawaiian,’ Pacific Currents, Special Issue of American Quarterly. 67.3 (2015): 727-747.
Hawai‘i, which means that Native Hawaiians are an ethnic minority in their own homeland.\textsuperscript{31} The inclusion of quotation marks around ‘terrorism,’ which is mirrored in Osorio’s performance of the poem,\textsuperscript{32} reflects an ingrained scepticism in many Hawaiian nationalists about the motivations of US military incursions in the Middle East, particularly regarding questions of resource exploitation and the promotion of democratic systems of government.\textsuperscript{33} Whilst each of these areas are substantial areas of concern, activism and research in themselves, Osorio uses her rhetorical skill to provide a fleeting-but-persuasive argument for their interconnectedness. The claim that wars overseas will not halt the rising waters at home remains an explicit and central synapse where the overt violence of war exchanges responsibility with the slow violence of climate change.

Osorio’s poem is at its most evocative and impactful when illustrating the convergence of wealth, power, race and responsibility:

Global Warming will break the foundation of a community without even shaking the penthouse suit
so while the men and women who finance the earth’s deterioration play the role of its savior
sipping martinis in hybrid glass bottom boats tallying the brown bodies that float
by this society’s roots are sinking in quicksand (34-40)

Here the hypocrisy of the words and policies of wealthy nations and corporations are succinctly pinpointed by contrasting their alleged role as environmental ‘saviors’ with the reality of their actions. The ecocritical implications of Osorio’s derogatory use of the word ‘hybrid’ points towards an indictment of the hypocrisy of the ‘clean energy’ industry, which includes the tourist industry’s promotion of ‘ecotourism’ that remains reliant on decidedly unclean air-travel to Hawai‘i. However, the term has a more complex history for indigenous people as a celebration of hybridity weakens bonds with place and amplifies the cultural, ethnic and racial mixing that has repeatedly been used as a weapon against indigenous people.

Since 1928, Hawaiians have been legally defined by their percentage of blood quantum derived from their relatedness to the people residing in Hawai‘i prior to 1778. There is no simple definition of ‘Hawaiian’ as the original rules have been altered in different contexts,\textsuperscript{34} but almost every official definition is in some way derived from blood quantum classification, which J. Kēhaulani Kauanui describes as a ‘predicament’ that ‘has long divided the Hawaiian

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{31} Wu et al. 9,13.
    \item \textsuperscript{32} TEDx Talks, 2:57.
    \item \textsuperscript{33} For example Haunani-Kay Trask’s opinion of President Barak Obama’s policies in Afghanistan, expressed in a 2010 interview with Eiko Kosasa. Journey to Justice: A Conversation With Dr. Haunani-Kay Trask. Centre for Hegemony Studies, Center for Hawaiian Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa. Film. 2010, 23:42.
    \item \textsuperscript{34} Office of Hawaiian Affairs Data Book for a comprehensive overview of definitions of (u/Native) Hawaiian across federal and state agencies, private and non-profit organisations. ‘Racial-Ethnic Identification’ Appendix: Data Book. OHA, 24 March 2017 http://www.ohadatabook.com/fr_appendix.11.html
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
community.’ In these terms, a celebration of hybridity has serious consequences for indigenous people.

In his discussion of indigenous opposition to hybridity, and the purpose of adopting strategically essentialist positions in questions of identity politics, historian Arif Dirlik notably argues that opposition to globalisation, in the form of indigenous nationalism, is necessary for creating the conditions whereby viable alternatives can be born. Using a framework of place versus space to theorise indigenous nationalism versus globalised flows of economic and social power, what could reasonably be called neo-colonialism, he argues that the opposition between place, a locally constructed geographical referent, and space, an international or supra-national construct of economic flows, is necessary to challenge notions of hybridity which have allowed the encroachment of the global into the local and the domination of place by space. Dirlik expressly names indigenous people as one of the groups whose identity is ‘deconstructed’ by hybrid re-renderings of the place/ space dichotomy, and reasserts the possibility that indigenous people’s being-in-place offers a strategic alternative to hegemonic power structures, because ‘they point to the re-conquest of space by place as an irreducible goal.’ He has criticised the mobilisation of hybridity ‘as [an] alibi against such conflicts’ which ‘does not just deconstruct power [but] also deconstructs claims to identity in legitimation of rethinking modernity, and the designing of alternative projects.’ Dirlik also argues that ‘ecological conceptions of place have some crucial insights to contribute by bringing nature into the conceptualization of place,’ which aligns with indigenous relationships with the earth.

Anthropologist Jonathan Friedman has criticized the notion of hybridity for labelling any form of successful identification as hegemonisation, arguing that because ‘a hybrid has an internal structure of its own, which is just as unitary as that of any ‘purer’ organism (whatever that might mean)’, an ambivalence is created because new binaries are created: ‘unity versus confusion; organization versus juxtaposition.’ Friedman sees the spectre of class in self-designations of hybridity, noting that whilst it expresses the reality of ‘the post-modern

35 Kauanui argues that ‘the colonial legacies of blood quantum politics continue to impact contemporary Native Hawaiian struggles for land and recognition,’ because when Hawaiians ‘mix’ racially and culturally, even today, they are subject to reductive laws that reduce access or disqualify them from receiving the same support as native Hawaiians (small ‘n’), who are defined by the OHA as those with a blood quantum of at least 50%. See J. Kēhauani Kauanui. Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) 171; and OHA ‘Racial-Ethnic Identification’ n.p.


37 In Dirlik’s analysis ‘... places are not given, but produced by human activity, which implies that how we imagine and conceive places is a historical problem. In its most recent manifestation, place consciousness is closely linked to, and appears as the radical other of that other conspicuous phenomenon of the last decade, globalism’ (151). I agree with Dirlik’s definition of globalism as ‘a signifier for certain processes (economic, political, social, and cultural)’ (154), and in this analysis those processes manifest in their negative effects on global temperature changes and environmental degradation, framed within Osorio’s indigenous Hawaiian ‘place-consciousness.’

38 Dirlik, 181.

39 Dirlik, 180.

40 Dirlik, 154.

cosmopolitan’ its main fallacy lies in its pretence to describe the lives of ordinary people. He warns that hybridity is predicated on the ‘presumption of once pure cultures that may have existed before the age of international capital,’ which sounds strikingly similar to the essentialist discourses it seeks to undermine. In this context, Osorio’s decision to inhabit an activist, indigenous voice can be seen as utilising an essentialist position against powerful global economic and political forces that have detrimental local impacts.

However, the crux of the dilemma of essentialism in indigenous identity, its relationship with the theoretical category ‘hybridity’ and its deployment as a ‘strategy’ is elucidated by Avril Bell as ‘ignor[ing] the point that the ‘substance’ claimed in the practice of political representation [of identity] does matter’ to indigenous people. Osorio juxtaposes the people ‘who finance the earth’s deterioration’ with ‘the brown bodies that float by’, and it is clear that she aligns herself with the latter. The image of martini sipping oligarchs in a glass-bottomed boat seems a blackly-humorous metaphor for Noah’s Ark — except this time they’re only letting the light-skinned, wealthy and ‘privately educated’ on board. The voyeuristic overtones of the sightseeing boat is both a pointed reference to the visibility of the injustices to those with the will to look, and a criticism of the media-watching public (which ironically this time includes Osorio herself), which tallies the brown bodies and watches the water levels rise. Wealth and power appear to engender a sense of immunity from the effects of globalisation’s excesses. Osorio’s position as an educated, comparatively wealthy Hawaiian studying at Stanford makes the position of the speaker in this poem, which is aligned in performance with Osorio herself, both essentialist (as it is racialised and class-inflected) and strategic (as these are only comparatively relevant to Osorio).

Tackling Spivak’s formulation of ‘strategic essentialism’ Bell argues that indigenous use of strategic essentialism is not ultimately aimed at dismantling all ‘essentialist’ identities including their own (as Spivak argues class does), but in fact seeks to maintain their difference and re-gain autonomy. ‘Inclusion and equality on any other basis [than the ‘Aboriginal dominant’] would suggest the success of the colonial project of assimilation,’ which is represented in ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ by the societies responsible for global warming.

Osorio’s emphasis on the long-term effects of political decisions is maintained through her attention to the inter-generational legacy of education quality, which she explicitly connects to global warming. Osorio is a passionate believer in the power of education to alter the course of history, and is scathing about the quality of education available in Hawai‘i:

42 Friedman, 81.
43 Friedman, 73.
45 For a discussion of the imbrication of narrative and performer voices in performance poetry see Somers-Willett, 93.
46 It is worth noting, however, that Native Hawaiians have had their indigenous identities questioned due to their choosing to study and live in the continental states. Haunani-Kay Trask’s indigenous identity in particular has come under attack because she was born in the San Francisco Bay area (where her father was at law school). For an example of such attitudes see Ken Conklin ‘Haunani-Kay Trask Biographical Information’ n.d. n.p. http://www.angelfire.com/hi2/hawaiiansovereignty/TraskBio.html.
The ‘decision’ to move away from Hawai‘i is often strongly influenced by family networks, high living costs and wanting to study a particular subject not offered at the University of Hawai‘i. See Trask, 17.
47 Bell, 121.
our hands above our heads trying to form prayers for relief funds
hoping
that the government might soon start funneling money back into education
so the next generation,
if there is one,
will learn how to prevent this from ever happening again
it is as if the government thinks that if we are uneducated we won’t be able to be
ashamed of them. (41-8)

Like most kānaka maoli activists before her, Osorio reaches beyond an indigenous-essentialist
position towards a more class-inflected differentiation with her criticism of Hawai’i State’s
policies on education. She has good reason; ‘Day 223: Sinking Bodies’ refers to ‘Furlough
Fridays’, which was Hawaiian Governor Linda Lingal’s preferred method of clawing back a
budget deficit by reducing the school week to four days in 2009. Low-income families, who
couldn’t afford childcare, and the children themselves, were most deeply affected.

At this point in the poem Osorio uses the flexibility of her medium to emotively shift between
four substantial topics and allow her audience to fill in the gaps. She writes:

instead of cutting from our 1 trillion dollar war
we’ve taken school days from our offspring
and we all know the environment is dying because our legislation is failing to
教 our children to sprout through concrete (61-64)

The proximity of militarism, education, environmentalism and policy is somewhat
overwhelming, but the links deserve unpacking. The military presence is huge in Hawai’i, and
on O‘ahu particularly. Approximately 47,000 active and reserve military are stationed in
Hawai’i, with a further 18,800 military civilians — this makes it the ninth-largest state for the
military in the USA. They, and the millions of tourists who descend on the fragile archipelago,
are serviced by a multi-million dollar hotel and service industry, which takes space and
resources away from local people and Native Hawaiians.

48 Most notable George Helm. See Rodney Morales ‘George Helm – The Voice and Soul’ Ho‘i Ho‘i Hou: A Tribute
49 In 2009-10 Hawai‘i faced a deficit of $1 billion and Gov. Lingle implemented a programme of furloughing
schoolchildren that was intended to cut 34 school days over two years. Public resistance meant that 17 Fridays were
evercut, meaning the state had the shortest school year in the country at just 126 days. Working parents had
to take unpaid or holiday leave, rely on family support, or pay $25-$50 per-child per-week in care costs.
0,8599,1932079,00.html and Michael Cooper ‘Governments Go to Extremes as the Downturn Wears On’. The New
50 Data current 31 December 2016. ‘Counts of Active Duty and Reserve Service Members and APF Civilians,’ DoD
51 Ramsay Remigiuss Mahealani Taum, ‘Tourism,’ The Value of Hawaii: Knowing the Past and Shaping the Future
As previously mentioned, a large number of young Native Hawaiians choose an itinerant military career as their most viable employment option. Formal education, when culturally irrelevant, is ill equipped to provide the skills children (particularly Native Hawaiian children) need to thrive in their particular locale. Osorio’s point is that mainstream education will not compensate for the cultural removal and health burden experienced by Native Hawaiian children as their lives become increasingly urbanised and industrialised. Osorio forms an elliptical point: education that fails to teach ecological sensitivity stores up problems for the future, as generations ignorant of their environment make poor decisions on both micro and macro levels, and a damaged environment lowers the health and wellbeing outcomes of future children, exacerbating the cycle.

Osorio extends her point in the next line, demanding ‘enough with the quick-fix band aids and budget cuts,’ which recognizes the tendency to make short-term political decisions in response to specific events, without addressing long-term implications. Nixon analyses such short-termism as at least partially a consequence of representational bias towards dramatic violent events and against slow violence. In an increasingly digital age where access to vast volumes of information is becoming (at least for those with internet access) normal, our brains are adapting to concentrating on multiple information sources but for shorter periods of time. This ‘age of degraded attention spans’ makes focussing public attention and state policy on long-term, intergenerational problems harder, and recording the true effects across dozens, even hundreds of years, even more difficult. As Nixon puts it, ‘fast is faster than it used to be’, and ‘in this cultural milieu of digitally speeded up time, and foreshortened narrative, the intergenerational aftermath becomes a harder sell.’

Osorio is utilising an art form that is specifically designed to be time-bound and immediate, in keeping with the technology-driven, attention-deficient generation of which she is a part, to call for a long-term perspective on social and environmental ills that traverse generations. Towards the end of the poem Osorio’s indictments become even harsher. She demands:

Don’t let the rhetoric fool you
there is nothing natural about the way we’ve destroyed our planet
Haiti is just 9/11 from a different angle
we are our own worst enemies
terrorists dressed as ‘patriots’ (75-79)

This echoes environmental writer Jill Schneiderman’s argument that we must resist pervasive economic and political influences that aim to persuade us that environmental degradation is somehow inevitable. Osorio ends the poem with a derisive challenge:

it is time to decide
who is gonna be privileged enough to survive

---

53 Nixon 12.
54 Nixon, 12-13.
55 Nixon, 13.
Sea-levels are rising. Unequal wealth distribution and persistent racism means the effects are borne by the impoverished many, rather than the responsible few. But, as Osorio points out, there is a decision to be made. If we work to make invisible violence visible, and hold perpetrators of ‘slow violence’ responsible as tenaciously as we do for traditionally recognised forms of violence, we could, potentially, change the tide. In the meantime, Osorio is standing and speaking; lending her breath to a genealogy of voices which connect indigenous knowledge of truly sustainable land management with the communication potential of our modern world.

Emma Scanlan’s AHRC funded doctoral research centred on the relationship between Native Hawaiian poetry and politics, and extended into areas of ecocriticism, indigenous epistemology, mana wahine (women’s power), and identity formation. She co-organised of the Pacific Waves Conference, held at the University of Sussex, which aims to create conversations between scholars of the Pacific in the UK and internationally.
Works Cited


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

Zimbabwean Spoken Word and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment

Ricarda de Haas
University of Bayreuth

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.

* * * * *

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-

---

³Meigh-Andrews 3.
poetry or music-clips. 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. 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 offshoot 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* 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’.

### 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. 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. With the introduction of the Broadcast Services Act (2001), a quota of 75 per cent local content ensured government control over television, as audio or video recordings, and in other forms based in technologies of reproduction.

---

4 According to Philip Auslander ‘mediated 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.
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’. 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 Toyitoi Art Kollektive’s 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, ... 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.

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’. 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’. 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. 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.’

---

10Kellerer 52f.
11The Toyitoi Art 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.

Ricarda de Haas. “‘Both feared and loved, an eligible to most’: Zimbabwean Spoken Work and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment.’ Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
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

19Biko, personal interview.
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.
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.
25Magamba 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. The Sayer, an unusually long poem that was already known by many, was greeted with enthusiastic applause. The epic poem tells the story of a Sayer, an ancient griot, 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’. 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’.

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’. 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’. 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 rapper 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.

27The 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).


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.


31Somers-Willet 21.

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

36Dube 48.
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.

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 gain 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 Berlin

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. 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. 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

---

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.
42 Mando 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.

‘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’.

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. She distinguishes between fixed ‘geometrical space’ (architecture, interior) and ‘performative space’, which is permanently created and re-created by performers and audiences alike. 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 mediatised performance and in doing so ‘challenges the assumption that the live precedes the mediatized’. 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

---

43 de 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.
45 Fischer-Lichte 75ff.
46 Auslander 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 mediatised 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’.

Ricarda de Haas is a lecturer at University Vienna and at Humboldt University of Berlin. She completed her doctoral thesis “Spoken Word goes digital. Performance Poetry und Social Media in Harare und Johannesburg” at Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) at University of Bayreuth. De Haas specialises in contemporary African literatures in English, performance studies, and gender studies. Her current research project focusses on African literatures in/and New Media.

48 Fischer-Lichte 38.
49 Personal information, the director Johanna Meier.

Works Cited


Ricarda de Haas. “‘Both feared and loved, an enigma to most’: Zimbabwean Spoken Work and Video Poetry between Radicalisation and Disillusionment.’

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa

Eve Nabulya
Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Makerere University, Uganda

Abstract

This paper discusses the employment of fear eliciting images characteristic of environmental apocalypse as a means of influencing the attitude of audiences in regard to manifestations of climate change in selected poems from East Africa. The analysis draws on Stephen O’Leary and Greg Garrard’s understanding of comedy and tragedy as modes of thought applicable to apocalyptic stories. Following this thought, I analyse renditions of scenes of destruction in the poems to understand how harnessing emotions of fear and pity may be valuable in environmental discourse. I argue that far from enhancing the notion of an inescapable calamity towards which humans are fast careering, the emotions of fear and pity in the poems potentially enhance meaningful engagement with the ecological crisis, and promote culpability among audiences. I assert that reading apocalyptic representations as attempts to achieve rhetorical effects might be more beneficial in the context of environmental literary criticism than consideration of the truth value of apocalyptic projections. The article points out some of the ways in which the song mode of poetry may be supportive to this way of reading.

Introduction:

The written poetry of East Africa is significantly influenced by oral recitations, incantations and songs alongside which the genre thrives. Among other qualities ‘deterritorialized from traditional orature,’ to use Evan Mwangi’s term, this poetry is context sensitive. Much of it is composed in response to certain socio-political conditions prevailing in the respective primary settings. In conformity, the anthology Echoes Across the Valley, from which I select the poems for this paper, brings together over 200 poems clustered under themes such as: domestic and armed violence, political betrayal and corruption, poverty and deprivation as well as environmental issues. To date this is probably the only poetry collection from the region that dedicates a full section to environmental issues. The poetry engages with these issues in ways that indicate the purpose to influence the attitude of audiences concerning specific matters, in resonance with Tanure Ojaide’s remark that the African poet sees him/herself as ‘obliged to enlighten the people’. Such socio-political responsiveness renders the poetry valuable for environmental discourse.


In a general commentary on *Echoes Across the Valley*, Jack Mapanje notes that the poems follow the East African 'song tradition' initiated, in part, by Okot p’Bitek in his four Songs.\(^4\) Okot’s song style which Mapanje refers to is in turn anchored in Acholi oral songs and, according to Charles Okumu, exhibits characteristics of specific subgenres such as the satirical song and the funeral dirge.\(^5\) By locating the poems in the song tradition, Mapanje gestures towards certain stylistic specifications. For instance, poetry in the song style does not follow strict conventions in terms of structure. This is not at all to say that it lacks aesthetic rigour, or that it defies order. Rather, the East African song tradition is largely an experimental medium of poetic expression mostly in free verse, and drawing heavily on the natural landscape for the formulation of similes and other figures of speech. It is such qualities that appropriately position the poetry selected here for apocalyptic modes of expression.

How does the rhetoric of eco-apocalypse become relevant in the East African context? Issues related to climate change are of significant interest to the East African population particularly because the region (Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania) is 80% rural, with 75% of the population engaged in agriculture, mainly in smallholder mixed farming.\(^6\) In such a setting, adverse weather conditions like droughts and floods present major challenges both economically and socially. Yet lately the meteorological conditions in the region have deteriorated as evidenced by frequent protracted droughts and rain storms. Until about three decades ago, much of East Africa enjoyed equatorial climate with two rainy seasons (March to June and September to December) and an average temperature of 27°C all year round (Waithaka et al 2013; Baguma 2009). However, since the late 1990s the seasons have been unpredictable. Many parts of Kenya and Tanzania have experienced terrible droughts which leave big numbers of livestock dead.\(^7\) Moreover, every year there are media reports of loss of lives as people are struck by lightning and thunder, and of property damage and displacements due to floods (Yier 2002). In the mountainous areas in the East of Uganda, in particular, heavy rains have been causing serious landslides in the last decade.\(^8\)

It is no wonder then that pioneer ecocritical studies of East African literature have been revolving around human relations with the land and related challenges, as scholars including Laura Wright\(^9\) and Renee Binder and G.W. Burnett confirm.\(^10\) It appears that in recent times

---


issues related to climate change have attracted attention. A number of literary works from this region including Bukenya\textsuperscript{11}, Mbugu\textsuperscript{12} and Omtatah\textsuperscript{13} are engaged with droughts as the most immediately perceived effects of climate change. In seeming resonance, some poets have written on the effects of winds, rain and thunder storms, floods, and droughts on livelihoods. Against such a backdrop, I regard the selected poems, especially in view of their relationship to the song tradition, as committed responses to prevailing conditions. I maintain that although apocalyptic tendencies in literature are often detected in dramas and novels, these poems invite such reading through their thematic focus and stylistic innovations.

The paper focuses on three poems: ‘July’ by Jotham Tusingirwe, ‘A Sudden Storm’ by Michael Vincent Mugabi and ‘Nativity’ by Eric Sikujua Ng’maryo, all from the section entitled Nature’s Play in Echoes Across the Valley. Two of these poems, ‘A Sudden Storm’ and ‘Nativity’ represent the violence with which rain storms descend on human settlements, while ‘July’ recreates two scenes of a drought stricken land and the subsequent effect on animals and vegetation. I read the poems not only as commentaries on the corresponding aspects of climate change, but also as rhetorical interventions in the mode of apocalypse. This is mainly because the poems seem to focus on eliciting emotions of fear and pity concerning the future, through imagery and other stylistic devices. I consider the effectiveness of the imagery in representing past and possible disaster and in enhancing emotional engagement with the issues raised. I anchor this approach to eco-poetry in Stephen O’Leary’s notion of tragic and comic apocalypse as employed by Greg Garrard in the context of environmental discourse. The paper proposes that reading apocalyptic representations this way might be more beneficial in the context of literary criticism than consideration of the truth value of apocalyptic projections in some earlier studies.

Shades of (eco)apocalypse
The increasing outcry concerning carbon emissions and the resultant global warming expected to cause major climatic changes on the planet has bolstered apocalypse as one of the modes of arousing attention to human responsibility concerning the fate of the planet. The term ‘apocalypse’, derived from Greek, originally means revelation or unveiling, but has come to mean the notion of cosmic degeneration towards a catastrophic end of history, or ‘that discourse that reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny’.\textsuperscript{14} In the Christian tradition, this thinking is mostly based on the book of Revelations in The Holy Bible, which spells out an unfortunate end of the world as a penal disaster. Stephen O’Leary in his seminal work, Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric (1994) proposes what he refers to as the theory of apocalyptic discourse. Drawing on the work of Adela Yarbro Collins who compares the effect of apocalyptic texts on the audience to catharsis in Greek drama, O’Leary rereads the book of Revelations as tragi-comedy. He notes that in the book the perpetuators of evil face an irreversible verdict of destruction while there is a blissful end for the faithful,\textsuperscript{15} contrary to the tragic mode. O’Leary suggests that apocalypse can be understood as a mode of thought, and thus not necessarily bound by generic classifications.\textsuperscript{16} I will return later to this point. But most

\textsuperscript{11} Austin Bukenya, A Hole in the Sky (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 2013).
\textsuperscript{12} Ng’ang’a Mbugu, Terrorists of the Aberdare: A Novella (Nairobi: Big Books, 2009).
\textsuperscript{13} Okoiti Omtatah, Voice of the People: A Play. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2007).
\textsuperscript{15} O’Leary 67.
\textsuperscript{16} O’Leary 69.
importantly for this discussion, both O’Leary and Collins acknowledge the relationship between apocalypse and tragic drama as consisting in the significance of the emotions of fear and pity as a resource for effectiveness.

O’Leary addresses apocalypse in relation to religious eschatology, but when it takes on an environmental inflection, apocalypse becomes a discourse which ‘recounts humanity’s fall from ecological grace’. Eco-apocalypse has continued to thrive because, as O’Leary notes, it functions as ‘useful rhetoric’ which potentially addresses questions of morality in society. Indeed Lawrence Buell acknowledges that apocalypse is ‘the single most powerful master metaphor’ in the service of environmentalism (The Environmental Imagination 285). As handed down from Christian eschatological stories, apocalypse is framed in a tripartite model where good contends with evil until a climatic point when each receives its ultimate corollary as a reward or punishment. Under such a framework punishment is the overriding feature of eco-apocalyptic literary works, constructed through images and other linguistic strategies which potentially maximise emotions of fear and pity. The idea is to promote meaningful reflections towards change of attitude and perhaps behaviour.

Fear, the most significant tool of apocalyptic rhetoric, is defined by Aristotle as ‘a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future’ and he adds that what we fear calls for pity when we see it happening to others. Eco-apocalyptic stories focus on accentuating the notion of ultimate catastrophe as a consequence of human abuse of ecological order, so as to arouse enough fear in the audience and in turn enhance meaningful engagement with the ecological crisis. This means that whereas fear and pity in the classical tradition were regarded as negative feelings from which people had to be freed by means of tragic plots, fear in eco-apocalypse plays a positive role. As such, in the eco-apocalyptic dispensation the emotions of fear are not purged away but are harnessed as a motivation for future action.

Greg Garrard in his Ecocriticism draws on O’Leary’s insight to identify two modes of eco-apocalyptic literature, the tragic and the comic. The tragic, to begin with, is where events are featured in such a way that time seems to be ‘careering towards some final catastrophic conclusion’. Garrard further offers a useful list of defining characteristics of this approach which include: ‘The warning is presented in terms of absolute authority; the material threat is ‘evil’, and so, by association, are the authors of it; the consequences of failure to heed the warning are catastrophic; and the danger is not only imminent, but already underway’ (103). As Garrard has noted, this mode of representation may not be helpful to the environmental cause because it occludes intervention. It imagines humans as hurtling towards a catastrophic end and as involved in some form of irreversible self-destruction. The emotions of fear elicited in this case then spring from a sort of terminal gloom. The comic approach, on the other hand, regards human eco-abusive behaviour as errors that can be corrected and the danger averted or minimised. In Garrard’s terms, comic apocalypse tends to promote ‘ethical subtlety’ in which the idea is for people to ‘live in light of the possibility’ (96) of catastrophe, while continuing

18 O’Leary 3.
19 O’Leary 6.

with their ordinary duties. This approach thus allows for hope. It is in this understanding that I appreciate representations of fearful scenes in the selected poetry.

My interpretation of apocalypse is also motivated by Garrard’s comments on the mode. Citing Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*, Garrard maintains that apocalyptic writing is often misleading in its alignment of facts to support theories of doom (108), leave alone its over simplification of complex issues in an attempt to locate blame among other shortcomings (115). Garrard’s observations, I note, are based on his appraisal of environmental nonfiction and I would like to think that literary eco-apocalyptic works might need other parameters of assessment. This is so especially because literary works rarely ever make authoritative time-bound predictions which would be rated as false prophesies should they never come true. It is true that some creative works, including poetry seek close associations with actual contexts, but even then, they can only claim general ‘symbolic referentiality’ ‘as part of the overall work of the text’ (L. Buell *The Future* 33). In that light, I would suggest that the effectiveness of literary apocalyptic works, can be assessed on its persuasive potential. This persuasion is strongly tied to style, and in particular to the way the text manages emotions of fear and pity so as to enhance change in attitudes.

The poetry in focus has a special relationship with apocalyptic discourse. While what has come to be known as literary eco-apocalypse are stories projecting a calamitous end as a result of ecologically related disaster, this poetry does not proceed that way. Rather, it features scenes and experiences that attest to the severity of deterioration in ecological balance in general, and climatic conditions in particular, emphasising the possibility of worse disaster(s) without ruling out possibilities of improvement for the better. Actually, I find the poetry aligned with Frederick Buell’s idea of the new apocalyptic literature that features ‘fictional worlds that do not conveniently end with apocalypse’. On the contrary, it invites audiences to ‘realise just how deeply in the soup they themselves are and how difficult and uncertain solutions are’. In the next section I explain how such ideas play out in the representation of droughts and storms.

**A devastating drought in ‘July’**

The poem ‘July’ is written by Jotham Tusingiirwe. This upcoming Ugandan poet seems to be concerned with the impact of meteorological conditions on a subsistence farming community, for his other poem in the same anthology entitled ‘Old Woman’s Prayer’ recounts the words of a farmer thanking God that the rains have finally come and that her crops and livestock can do well. In ‘July’, Tusingiirwe describes a scene of drought, and the related impact on various forms of life. The poem features a landscape characterised by banana plantations, nut gardens, patches of grassland dotted with trees and riverbeds lined with papyrus, which is familiar especially in central and southern Uganda. However, the picture of a land completely devastated by drought and ravaged by violent winds and wide spreading fires, that the poem recreates, is not a common sight in the country. It is thus possible to say that the poem is a projection of a future state of the landscape should the present conditions of protracted droughts, increased temperatures and reduced precipitation continue. Moreover, the poem is entitled ‘July’, the driest

---

23 F. Buell 322.
25 Luvai and Makhoka 21.
month of the year in the areas around Lake Victoria. Yet the conditions described – the dry swamps and riverbeds, the withered vegetation, and unbearable heat accompanied by ferocious winds, and raging fires – indicate a reality far worse than the expected dry spell in July. Thus, the term ‘July’, as used in the poem, does not refer to the regular season, but as a reference point for the audience to imagine the temperatures described.

The poem presents the vegetation and other life forms, including humans and animals, in a desperate state, which in a way attests to the fact that the conditions prevailing are unexpected, and adaptation is slow. While it is not right to associate all droughts with climate change, there is indication in the poem to that effect. The first stanza opens with the line: ‘The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens’ in which the personified earth is represented not only as a sufferer, but also as taking an accusing stance. The verb ‘gapes’ signifies a blank look of surprise and the figure also implies that there is a deviation from the expected weather conditions. In other words, the ‘weary’ earth is disappointed by the refusal of the heavens to give rain. This figurative expression thus enables the poet to express an idea related to the expansive nature of climate change in terms of time, in a single phrase.

The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens  
The limp dry grass droops to the earth,  
Dry banana leaves rustle and crackle in the heat  
Chaff, dust and paper swirl in the white wind  
Iron sheets clatter and clang, grass thatches scatter  
Skirts rise and flutter in the air  
Trees creak and screech and shriek (1-7)

The humanising metaphor in reference to the earth, ‘thirsty’ (1), implies the extreme heat and dryness of the soil, and the fact that it can no longer support life. In addition, the line is followed by an account of how the different elements indicate their thirst; the grass is withered and just ‘droops’ to the ground in resignation (2), and so are the banana leaves which ‘rustle and crackle’ (3). Line 4 calls attention to the violent wind as an aggravating factor. The auditory imagery created through such words as ‘rustle’, ‘crackle’, ‘swirl’, ‘clatter’, ‘clang’, ‘flutter’, ‘screech’ and ‘shriek’ emphasize the intensity of the heat and the wind. These irritating sounds are accompanied by an image of the air and atmosphere filled with flying dust, pieces of paper and thatch. Together, these pilled auditory and visual images not only construct a terrifying understanding of the worsening ecological condition but also of the real threat to human survival. That way, the representation invites the audience to ponder over the crisis and possibilities of redemptive action.

In the final lines of the stanza, the construction of the apocalyptic metaphor reaches a climax through the pilling of visual and kinaesthetic images. Here the emotional effect of the description is heightened by the created impression of the progression of disaster and the gravity of the catastrophe.

Fleeing monkeys chattering in lament  
The swamp papyrus their home on fire in ruins  
Papyrus-head embers fly in the smoky air  
Perching on and setting nuts and bushes aflame  
Hillsides black with fire, vast destruction

Eve Nabulya. ‘A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa.’  
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.  
Cows and sheep roving in vain for grass (8-13)

In these lines the audience suddenly becomes aware of even greater trouble: Implicitly, the heat has caused wild fires and reduced the already meagre chances of survival for both humans and animals. The fire, flying on the wings of the wind, consumes the surviving vegetation as well as food crops (nuts). In his discussion on the emotions, Aristotle notes that people fear something if it is imminent, for we are not usually bothered about the distant future. The continuous action of ‘fleeing’, ‘chattering’, ‘roving’ and other verbs in present tense in these lines have a way of drawing the disaster to the present thereby enhancing fear.

In addition, the visual image of a landscape black with smoke and embers, of animals wandering and making all sorts of noises in search of water and grass, is the apex of apocalyptic imagery in this poem. One cannot help to wonder about the survival of humans in such a situation. If the burning ‘nuts’ are read as representative of food crops, then the poem indicates a worrying diminution in life supporting resources including oxygen, food and water. Surprisingly, the poet does not mention anything directly related to the state of humans in this scene. Is the silence intended to leave room for hope for human survival? Yet as I hinted earlier, such wild fires are not a major problem in Uganda, the implied setting of the poem. Thus, the improbability of the scene described in the poem tends to depict the poet’s message as projective, thereby ameliorating the terminal gloom. Notable also is the symbolic significance of fire as an agent of destruction. In the first place, there is an implied relationship between a fast advancing conflagration engulfing the whole landscape, and the unstoppable effects of climatic change. In addition, the poem benefits from the assumption of allusion to the Christian conception of apocalypse. I relate this notion of fire bringing an end to human history to fear triggering ideas of hell in the Christian faith, although Tusingiirwe’s poem does not directly acknowledge the connection. This comparison in turn allows the cross mapping of emotional response potentially beneficial in the environmental campaign.

In comparison with the crisis above, stanza two describes a relatively calm situation. It takes the audience to another scene that does not match the calamitous rigour of the first stanza, but which also recreates ominous images of disaster.

    Solitary eagles sailing high in the sky
    Streams and wells deserted and lifeless
    Mudfish and crabs dead and stinking
    Ladies on verandahs sipping banana brew
    Heaven blue with a few scattered white clouds
    The glaring sun scorching and burning
    Farmers clearing and ploughing the land
    In preparation for the September rains. (1-8)

Apparently, the drought has lasted a long time and the rest of the birds, except meat eating eagles are either dead or have migrated. The audience is invited to imagine such a place where the excruciating heat has dried the rivers and streams and the air is filled with the smell of dead water creatures. The ‘blue’ and ‘white’ sky (line 5) bears no signs of rain and the sun which deploys unrelenting furry (6) portends even more trouble for humans. The last two lines

---

26 Aristotle 69.

referring to the hopeful farmers then stands in sharp contrast to the rest of the poem, and attract varied interpretations, as I will clarify below. For now, I will emphasize the idea that since the situation recreated in the poem is not a common occurrence in Uganda, the poem is likely to stir emotions of fear for the uncertain future heralded by frequent droughts.

Alongside images that promote fear for the unknown fate of humans in the face of various manifestations of climate change, emerges an accusing tone. This begins in a subtle way through cultivation of sympathy for the different entities scorched by the sun and buffeted by the wind. In the first stanza, the association of the earth (soil) but also in a broader sense the land with a humanly painful feeling of thirst (1), appeals to our sense of pity. This humanising metaphor is also extended to the trees which are imagined in a struggle against the fury of the wind. In the sound ‘shriek’ the poet suggests the pain and suffering these elements are undergoing (7). In addition, the visual image of monkeys ‘fleeing’ and lamenting as their habitat is being consumed by fire (8) and of cows and sheep ‘roving in vain for grass’ and choking with smoke filled air also engenders sympathy (13, 11). It is noteworthy that the speaker refers to the papyrus as a ‘home’ (9) for the monkeys, contrary to their known habitat – the forest. This implies that forests have disappeared from this imagined landscape leaving wild animals, as victims to human tyranny, to find alternative habitation. In turn, these images create room to reflect on the effects of deforestation and also its perpetrators.

Humans are not the main subject of this poem and it is possible for one not to notice the role associated with them in the imaginary course of events. The first mention of humans comes through a synecdochical metaphor. Amid the noise and movements caused by the wind ‘skirts rise and flatter’ (6). The reference to women as skirts, in a way dehumanises them, especially in comparison the humanisation of the trees and the earth already mentioned here. What I make of this is an unsympathetic attitude on part of the speaker towards women. This notion becomes more pronounced in the second stanza when the poet strategically positions the line: ‘Ladies on verandahs sipping banana brew’ just after three lines bemoaning the sad fate of the birds, and water features under the scorching sun (1–4), and follows them with two lines emphasizing the complete absence of life giving precipitation (5, 6). In this light, the poet calls attention to the incongruity between the action of the ladies and the prevailing conditions both structurally and semantically. Moreover, the behaviour of the women in an atmosphere engulfed by the smell of death and the sweltering heat depicts complacency and by extension, culpability for making no efforts to address the glaringly life-threatening conditions. Similarly, farmers are said to be ploughing the land despite the unrelentingly aggressive heat and remarkably clear sky as indicated in the preceding line. However, the incongruity can also be read as a confirmation of the optimistic idea that since the adverse effects of climate change are mere projections and not predictions, one may continue with agricultural activity in the expectation of better conditions.

It is important to note, however, that the poet does acknowledge the dilemma involved in attempts to apportion blame for the prevailing conditions attending climate change. For instance, reading the metaphor in ‘The thirsty earth gapes wearily at the heavens’ (stanza 1 line 1) in tandem with the line ‘The glaring sun scorching and burning’ (stanza 2 line 6) enables the hypothetical tension between the two elements to emerge. In other words, while the earth (and the composite of elements therein) accuses the sun of causing harm because of its excessive heat, the sun also has reasons to accuse the earth for interrupting its natural operations. This symbolizes the confusion surrounding the location of blame amongst humans. When Garrard
condemns the search for culprits as one of the effects of eco-apocalyptic rhetoric, he is not opposed to locating blame per se, but to its improper placement which may involve oversimplification of complex systems and processes in order to zero down on a single cause. Notable though, the way the speaker in this poem tacitly draws attention to the culpability of humans minimises the risks Garrard identifies. This is achieved by providing a holistic picture of the complexities surrounding the raised temperatures and reduced precipitation. The earth-heavens relationship above, for instance, indicates that the events that lead to the drought belong to a chain of causes and effects whose origins are neither easy nor beneficial to trace. The sun burns mercilessly and deprives humans and animals of food, and may be the cause of wild fires and the associated damage. Yet human activities like the deforestation alluded to (18-19) could have contributed to the increased temperatures. More importantly, the way the various entities are represented, including elements like the sun, the soils, the vegetation, animals and humans, suggests that both are agents and victims at the same time.

The poem July makes no claims to universally applicable projections. It presents a calamity that faces or may befall a certain community in an unnamed landscape characterised by small hills, patches of farmland river beds and a few trees. Although in the last part of stanza one the poem represents a hopeless situation in which a whole landscape is destroyed by fire, the poet does not present it as an inescapable, irreversible verdict of destruction. Rather, the poem generates enough fear to reinforce culpability and facilitate change of attitudes. It is apparent that the poem utilises the emotive devices of apocalypse without its problematic claims to authoritative pronouncements. It provides for rays of hope in its representations of the fate of the animals. The monkeys, cows and sheep are moving about in search of food and smoke free air have chances of survival should they stumble out of the reach of the conflagration. This mode of representation is what resonates with Garrard’s idea of comic apocalypse.

Finally, the contradictions within the poem can be read as a confirmation of the comic mode of apocalypse. In the first stanza, the representation of the dying vegetation and the extreme heat that culminates into a wide spread fire falls just short of creating an impression of an inescapable irreversible calamity. But stanza two, with its rendition of extremely dry conditions minus the mood of crisis, gives an impression of continuity. It is possible to receive stanza two as a description of the same landscape as in stanza one several months after the conflagration. In that light the stanza becomes a symbolic representation of life after disaster. In fact, the incongruity between human action in stanza two, the ladies who revel as if all is well and the farmers who continue to plough under the scorching, mocking sun, calls to mind Frederick Buell’s understanding of the society beyond the millennial ‘hysterical warnings that didn’t come true,’ in which people live with the crisis as part of life. He adds that this situation is reflected in literary works which depict the ‘deepening environmental crisis as a context in which people dwell.’ But whether these incongruities are read as representing coping mechanisms or as complacency being chastised by the poet, they have the effect of neutralising the fear to make room for an optimistic outlook on the circumstances.

Apocalyptic representations of rain storms: ‘A Sudden Storm’

27 Garrard 115.
28 F. Buell xvii.
29 F. Buell 3211-22.
While rainfall is the major direct source of water for both agriculture and domestic use in East Africa, seasons have become more unpredictable, with fluctuating volumes of rainfall. In Uganda for instance, heavy rains have been causing serious landslides in the last decade, in the Eastern part of the country. This dilemma is captured in the two poems I discuss in this section. Dispatching emotively descriptive imagery and metaphors, ‘A Sudden Storm’ by Michael Vincent Mugabi and ‘Nativity’ by Eric Sikujua Ng’maryo represent the destructive vitality of rain storms as well as human vulnerability to the forces of nature. In both poems, the malignancy of the storms which manifests in violent winds, thunder and lightning, and floods of water is amplified, thereby eliciting feelings of fear and foreboding which are characteristic effects of apocalyptic discourse. Just like in the last section where renditions of the disaster are interspersed with hopeful moments, the poems in this section too provide for optimistic views, even as they bemoan the destruction caused by the storms.

The poem ‘A Sudden Storm’, to begin with, is written by the Ugandan poet Michael Vincent Mugabi. It recreates a scene of a destructive storm in an urban densely populated location, as indicated by the large number of people who scuttle about at the approach of rain. While the stampede also attests to the unexpectedness of the rain, and the clouds of dust the wind carries indicate that the rain follows a long dry spell. What is remarkable about this poem is that right from the start it plunges the reader into a deeply frightening scene and sustains the tension through a linear thought structure. The way the poet draws the audience into the poem resonates with Angus Fletcher’s idea of the environmental poem. Fletcher rightly argues that through description linguistic features may acquire ‘the symbolic power to surround, similar to the way nature surrounds the human observer. The pilled images in this poem gives an increasing sense of being present at the scene and being surrounded by the various sounds, sights and activities. Fletcher’s observation then becomes true. He notes that through description ‘a poem does not merely suggest or indicate an environment as part of its thematic meaning, but actually gets the reader to enter into the poem as if it were the reader’s environment of living.’ By drawing the audience into the scene this way the poet maximises emotive effectiveness. Renditions of the destructive power of winds, thunder and the raindrops all build a rich experience that leaves the audience with fear and foreboding concerning future storms.

The poem opens with a description of the sky followed by the violence of the wind on the surroundings, the representation of the actual downpour and finally a conclusive comment on the irony in the whole situation. Emotions of fear are enhanced through several strategies, beginning with the creation of a chilling atmosphere through innovative piling of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic images. The first five lines invite the audience to imagine the sinister appearance of the sky.

Sable clouds
Like factory chimney smoke
Menacingly float
Riding upon chariots of howling wind

30 NEMA 2010.
33 Fletcher 122.
Blinding flashes of lightning
Incessantly light the skies (1-6)

The imagination of a darkened sky with dark clouds (1-2) speedily moving across the sky already creates a frightening sight. Some of the clouds are moving low and seem to be aiming at the observer as implied by reference to their movement as ‘menacing’. This sight is aggravated by the loud noise of the wind termed as ‘howling’ (line 4) accompanied by harsh peels of lightening. The next set of lines relays more chaos as birds, children and adults all dart about in attempts to take cover from the fast approaching storm. The image given by these fast, chaotic movements in turn creates a mounting sense of an unstoppable, advancing catastrophe. This mood of fear is sustained throughout the poem through the fast pace in which the poem develops. The tension reaches a climax just before the end of the poem where the rain is portrayed as: ‘Laying waste crops, houses and granaries/ inviting immense suffering to humanity’ (26, 27).

The scary atmosphere is further enhanced by amplified representations of the destructive vitality of various aspects of the storm. Thunder and lightning and the attendant clouds are constructed as great forces of destruction. Before it rains, the clouds are compared to an airborne animate for they are, ‘menacingly float[ing]’, as if in conscious action, and are also moving vigorously as if ‘riding upon chariots of … wind’ (4). The ‘menacing’ character of the clouds frightens both humans and birds (25) with their ‘blinding flashes of lightening’ (25). Yet in the progress of the storm the sound of thunder intensifies, and it is compared to that of gunshots in: ‘Thunder like guns of war explode / as the storm builds on’ (24, 25). This image, reminiscent of a war situation, especially in the context of the turbulent political history of East Africa is loaded with meaning. In the least, it amplifies the gravity of danger humans are exposed to in the event of storms. It is undoubtable that the fear with which memories of war are invested for a section of the audience, if transferred to this situation, produces significant effects.

The wind as a primary agent of destruction is presented with even more power. It is imagined as a giant animate with ‘robust limbs’ (9) with which it picks clothes off lines (10) and picks leaves and dust and throws them around (11, 12). The force it exerts on the trees is expressed through the personified reaction of the trees in: ‘Trees painfully sway, coaxed/ To dance to the rhythm of the wind’s/ Bitter song’ (13-15). This strategy not only solicits sympathy for the trees but it also identifies these elements as fellow victims with humans to the fury of the wind. As the wind lays ‘waste crops, houses and granaries’ (26), thereby causing famine amongst the humans, so does it molest the trees. With emphasis on the nature of damage, the poet draws attention to the economic significance of the storm.

The rain itself is the other agent of destruction the poem represents. In the following lines, there is comparison between the sound of rain drops on the roof tops and ‘a myriad hands/ pounding a sole drum’ (22-23). This auditory image confirms the large volume of rain drops and the corresponding volume of water that instead of watering crops, just destroys them. The poet represents the rain as such:

A drizzle – ta!
Another – ta!

34 For instance, the twenty-year guerrilla war in Uganda (1990-2010), Terrorist attacks in Kenya eg. The recent Mpeketoni attacks (2014) and Westgate Mall shooting (2013).
Till the ta-ta-ta-ta tap
Upon the rooftops builds on
Like the work of a myriad palms
Pounding a sole drum (18-23)

This onomatopoeic rendering apart from making the frightening sounds alive to emotions, communicates a sense of the progression of the storm. Note how the external structure of the lines resonates with the idea of the building up of the storm, as each line is longer than the one before it. I have mentioned before that the poet initially builds an atmosphere to enhance feelings of fear into the audience, which he/she enhances with amplifying the malignancy of each of the agents of destruction. As I noted then, apocalyptic fear is not purged away, but settles as an emotion that informs positive action. The concluding note of this poet enables this process. In the last two lines: ‘When rain should have showered/ blessings’ (28-29), the poet draws attention to the irony underlying the destructive nature of the storm. This underscoring of the absurdity of life in a way transforms the feelings of fear into a more solid despair that leaves the audience to ponder over the role of humans in the worsening of climatic conditions.

It is notable however, that alongside the sad, angry and sometimes panicky tone of the poem is a hint of grim humour. In the first instance, humour is conveyed as a break between the tense rendition to the gloomy sky in the first six lines of the poem quoted above and the representation of the beginning of the down pour. The confused activity in the lines below does invoke a comic image:

Kids scamper into houses for safety
As the robust limbs of the wind
Pick clothes off lines, …
Trees painfully sway, coaxed
To dance to the rhythm of the wind’s
Bitter song. Adults grumblingly
Collect utensils and clothes
Before they are through,
A drizzle- ta! (8-18)

The tussle of clothes, dust, dry leaves, kids, and adults in the wind does produce some humour. Moreover, the poet refers to the movement of trees as dancing. This metaphor in the context of the buffeting power of the wind is inclined towards the comic. In addition, onomatopoeic representation of raindrops on the roof tops may be read as playful too. As I noted earlier, there are cases when apocalyptic thought manifests as a blend of tragic and comic modes. Unlike in the case of July, the poet here makes no effort to explain the possible genesis of such a situation. But this openness may be even more effective in enhancing meaningful reflection on the matter of meteorological volatility in particular and climate change in general. The next poem presents yet another approach to mediating the apocalyptic tone.

Death and Birth in ‘Nativity’
‘Nativity’ by Ng’maryo comments on the character of a violent storm, just like the previous poem. But apart from the cold wind, the darkened sky, loud thunder and lightning, the storm in this poem is characterised by hailstones. This makes it more violent than the one in the previous poem. In seeming incongruity with this subject, the title of the poem alludes to ‘the nativity’ an expression used in reference to the birth of Christ. Indeed, the poem develops in three parts, with the first nine lines focused on a violent storm, four lines on the ferocity of dogs, and the last seven lines about a child birth. Thus, from the start the audience is made aware of the polarity of experiences the poem brings across. These seemingly different subjects are brought into unity of meaning through figurative use of language as well as innovations with structure.

One of the remarkable aspects of this poem is the way the speaker achieves emotive effectiveness through a detached tone. The frightening character of the storm emerges in this case, not from a rendition of the chaos it causes, but from figurative language and diction.

The sky’s frowned brow
Thunders and growls and roars and rumbles
Lightning flashes
Violent lashes,
Heavens lour
Rains pour
Hail stones bounce on dry, red ground
Cold winds blow
Merciless, angry.
Mad dogs on night prowl
Bloodthirsty, hungry
And our land is bathed in a
Flood of blood. (1-13)

The sky is endowed with a ‘frowned brow’ (1), which suggests the face of an angry person. And this comparison can generate a wealth of meanings and pointers. For instance, why would the sky be angry? Is anyone to blame for the status quo? And if so, what is the attitude of the speaker? Is he or she remorseful? Is the cause of storms reversible? and so on. The overriding metaphor is not any less loaded. The sound of thunder is rendered as a verb and compared to the sound made by a dog and a lion in a row, in ‘growls and roars and rumbles’ (2). I note also that the joiner ‘and’ functions to render the sense of continuity in the stream of these angry sounds. In addition, the animating verb and noun in: ‘Lightning flashes/ Violent lashes’ (3,4) and the personification of the wind in ‘Cold winds blow/ Mercilessly, angry (8, 9)’ all emphasise the motivated violence of these elements. All these metaphors insinuate that there is an object of anger on which the blame rests and in turn call for self-examination on part of the audience.

The violence with which the storm rages emerges even more strongly through some form of extended parallelism that I will refer to as “structural metaphor”. It involves the positioning of two distinct elements next to each other as a way of invoking comparison. In this stanza, the first nine lines comment on the sky, the thunder, lightning, and wind, and without a break, line 10-13 introduce the subject of mad dogs and their fierce behaviour. I interpret this as a case of comparison. Moreover, the idea of dogs seems to be implied in an earlier metaphor in the first

35 Luva and Makhoka 29.

Eve Nabulya. ‘A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
two lines of the poem where thunder is referred to as ‘growl[ing]’. In this light, the storm can be imagined, for instance, as destroying everything in its way just as a mad dog would tear at anything it comes across. The last two lines of the stanza push the metaphor further by comparing blood, involved in the ferocious activities of the dog, to rain water (12,13). This complex metaphor in turn suggests that the storm causes a large number of deaths. Such a representation of the storm is bound to generate emotions strong enough to engender meaningful reflection on the matter.

Yet the same comparison between a mad dog and the agents of destruction in the storm is supportive to a comic mode of thought. This is more so when the juxtaposition is regarded as a strategy of internal structural diversion comparable to the fracturing of plots in the Brechtian theatre of alienation. Here I am talking about the interruption of conceptual flow by suddenly introducing new ideas into the stanza. Under such a conception, the introduction of a different subject in the stanza becomes a strategy to prevent deep emotional engagement with regard to the subject at hand, a sort of relief from the gloomy subject of the lines before. This idea gains ground in the second and third stanza where the poet brings up the subject of childbirth contrary to the logical flow of the poem.

The hour has come,  
The frightened child  
Pushes out alone into the dark  
And cold and rain. (1-4)

‘We have a child!’  
Cries the midwife  
Unto us a child is born. (1-3)

These two stanzas seem out of place with the illustrations of the storm in the first stanza. Readers might conclude that the destruction caused by the storm is so intense that the speaker seeks to escape from the horrifying details of the scene by changing the subject. Indeed, the midwife’s declaration in the third stanza, allusive to the biblical birth of Jesus, becomes a symbolic indication of hope and a new beginning. But the situational irony embodied in the juxtaposition of the two scenarios, death and birth, can also be understood as symbolic of the polarity of weather events. A rain storm, with all the destruction it causes, is always followed by the birth of new crops, and vegetation.

Conclusion
The song mode of poetry seems well positioned for the environmental cause because of its sensitivity to context and reliance on local environments for figures of speech. But most importantly, the form enjoys the liberty of making social and political commentaries without violating the wall between the audience and the speaking voice. It features particularised observations but maintains a subtle relationship with context that permits universal applicability. In the case of apocalyptic stories, this subtlety protects the poetry from accusations related to making false prophesies or engendering misguided policies, which would result from authoritative predictions. Yet the personal involvement characteristic of this poetry enhances transfer of opinions from the imaginary speaker to the audience through emotional involvement, thus increasing the potential to influence positively.
Apocalypse as a mode of thought which realigns punishment and reward with human action may find this form of poetry useful. In this age of the anthropocene, apocalyptic eco-literature has moved away from predictions of a catastrophic end of history to blazing representations of the crises, challenges and dilemmas with which humans have to live. The idea is to sustain serious engagement with alarming ecological realities while remaining open to positive change and interventions. As Garrard has stressed, ‘only if we imagine that the planet has a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it.’ Against that backdrop, fear as the major tool of apocalyptic narratives may be used differently. It should not to be harnessed as an end in itself so as to heighten despair and mourning for the irreversible fall of man from ecological grace. Rather, it should be seen as a tool for facilitating change in attitudes, and eventually in behaviour. This new apocalyptic dispensation of fear is well aligned with Garrard’s claim that comic apocalypse is more beneficial in the environmental campaign. Moreover, in the recent past environmentally committed literature has identified more and more with the rhetorical purpose. It is in this light then that the poetry such as the one discussed in this paper demands to be assessed on its effectiveness in employing fear and pity as persuasive resources.

Eve Nabulya is a PhD candidate in the English Department at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Her PhD research is on environmental-activism in East African Literature. Her other research interests are African Literature and Shakespearean drama. Nabulya is a Lecturer in the Department of Literature at Makerere University, Uganda (East Africa).

36 Garrard 116.
Eve Nabulya. ‘A Poetics of Climate Change: Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Selected Poems from East Africa.’

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.


Works Cited


<https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1135&context=suscholar>


‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s Dart

Marvin Reimann
Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

Abstract

In her long poem Dart, Alice Oswald focuses on the mutual relation between humankind and their natural environment, thus evoking a profound eco-consciousness through poetic means. By following the course of the river Dart from source to sea, the poem becomes a ‘songline’ in which the voices of various persons, who work and live with the river, merge into the all-embracing voice of the Dart. Strongly connected to the river’s song is its self that comes into being only through the other selves entering the stream and merging into one fluid identity that can express itself through others. As a result, landscape, animals and human beings are presented as fundamentally interdependent by constituting one self-contained ecosystem.

Hence, the aim of this paper will be to elucidate the coalescence of the human and the natural that is generated through the self-articulation of the river Dart. A theoretical context will be provided by discussing Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical approach to the relation between nature and language. Based on his concept of adéquation, a closer examination of the Dart’s voice will reveal the river’s animistic nature in which the anthropocentric and the ecocentric merge. The subsequent analysis of selected text passages will relate these ecocritical aspects to the river in terms of its depiction as a self-conscious spiritual being and a spatial entity that is experienced physically. In conclusion, the temporality of the Dart, exemplified through its mythological dimension, will be examined.

* * * * *

The fact that the relation between humankind and nature is becoming increasingly precarious constitutes a predicament of which literature has been aware for quite some time now. In her long poem Dart, for example, the contemporary poet Alice Oswald draws on a highly imaginative way of presenting its relevancy. As her poem mirrors the course of the river Dart from source to sea, it becomes a ‘songline’ in which the voices of various persons living with the river coalesce into one single voice, namely that of the Dart itself. Strongly connected to the river’s song is its self that comes into being only through the other selves entering the stream and merging into one fluid identity. The result is a poetic portrayal of an ecosystem, in which landscape, animals and human beings are essentially interdependent and form one single whole. With this poetisation of the relation between humanity and nature, Oswald evokes a profound eco-consciousness within the reader. Therefore, the important question arises how the creation as well as the cultivation of such an awareness can be achieved through poetry in the first place. Hence, the aim of this paper will be to elucidate the coalescence of humankind and nature, which is generated through the self-articulation of the Dart. In a first step, some preliminary considerations regarding the relation between the anthropocentric and the ecocentric will be provided. The subsequent analysis of selected text passages will relate these ecocritical aspects
to the river in terms of its depiction as a spiritual being, a physical place and the stream of time itself.

The intricate relation between language and nature is an issue particularly important for environmental writing whose principal object of representation consists in a nonconceptual entity different from and opposed to the intellect. In his ecocritical works, Lawrence Buell tries to offer a solution to the question how writing can approach the world and depict it adequately. On the one hand, he rejects classic realism and its dogma that a text has to accurately mirror the outside world because “even designedly “realistic” texts cannot avoid being heavily mediated refractions of the palpable world. … Languages are culturally coded symbol systems.”¹ Every external phenomenon first perceived and then articulated is thus automatically filtered through the one’s cognitive apparatus and socially constructed language. On the other hand, Buell claims that certain mimetic and referential qualities are nonetheless indispensable for environmental writing.² As a result, he proposes a middle-way, which he designates the text’s ‘dual accountability to matter and to discursive mentation.”³ This means that environmental writing is not supposed to just photographically mirror the outside world but that, while still referring to it, it should represent it in an imaginative and poetic discourse. Such a combination of mimesis and stylisation is summarised under the term ‘adéquation: verbalizations that are not replicas but equivalents of the world of objects, such that writing in some measure bridges the abyss that inevitably yawns between language and the object-world.”⁴ In contrast to rational and prosaic language, which tries to describe its object most accurately by creating a textual replica, an adéquation results from the use of figurative language and is thus aware of its own constructedness and intermediary role between subject and world. It does not define living nature as a fact or exhaust its meaning completely by attempting to force it into a fixed and constructed linguistic pattern. Instead, it only circumscribes and thereby approximates the object to which it refers by applying an image that, in its semantic relation to the phenomenon, remains flexible and never determinate. A metaphor does not depict something as it really is but imaginatively evokes an impression that correlates with the object to which it refers. Hence, Hubert Zapf aptly concludes that ‘the textual exploration of the relationship between conscious self and unconscious nature can therefore be performed only as a potentially endless process of analogy-building and figurative discovery.”⁵ This infinite approximation of poetic language concurrently signifies its going-beyond-itself. The image produced is an adéquation of nature’s liveliness as it denies to be pinpointed in its semantic content – like nature and life, which cannot be fully grasped because they are perpetually self-generating processes. The reader simply feels this vividness because the impression produced is itself alive. This somewhat emotional reaction results from the fact that the image does not merely address the intellect but also, and substantially, the imagination,

² Buell, Environmental Criticism 36.
⁴ Buell, Environmental Imagination 98.

Marvin Reimann. ““This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy”: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s Dart.’ Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
through which an object can be apprehended on an aesthetic level. That the imagination thus constitutes the link between the human and the natural world has already been claimed by the Romantic poet S.T. Coleridge: the imagination is ‘essentially vital’ since its rules ‘are themselves the very powers of growth and production’. Nature and imagination correspond in so far as they both constitute vibrant processes of creation, the former being material and the latter ideational.

Therefore, Buell states that ‘one has to imagine. … Not in order to create an alternative reality but to see what without the aid of the imagination isn’t likely to be seen at all.’ What lies irrecognisable for rational language is humankind’s ‘environmental bonding’, which can only be unveiled if one’s relation to the world becomes aesthetic. This union unfolds because poetic language engenders an emotional participation of the reader in the image which equals nature’s all-embracing vitality. In doing so, one realises that oneself is part of living nature. Concerning this matter, the literary critic Northrop Frye states something similar: the imagination allows humans to ‘recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man.’ The fact that Frye mentions a ‘full consciousness’ confirms that this coalescence cannot occur on a merely intellectual level; rather, an individual’s whole being must be affected.

By endowing the Dart, a material object existing in the South West of Great Britain, with a voice that comprises many other voices, Oswald creates an adéquation that transcends literal mimesis through poetic means. As a result, the Dart becomes intuitively palpable because it is more than just a physical entity. Furthermore, the river’s voice can be viewed as a poetic instantiation of animism which implies ‘that all the phenomenal world is alive in the sense of being inspired’ and ‘filled with articulate subjects, able to communicate with humans.’ In consequence, the muttering Dart is no mere reflector in which humanity beholds its own self; rather, it reveals that both, nature and human beings, share a spiritual basis. Yet, in order to sense this all-pervading spirit, one’s understanding as well as imagination and emotion must be affected through the use of figurative language. Bestowing a voice on the river therefore functions as a kind of translation of the natural into the human, allowing for mutual communication that would be impossible without this common substructure.

This shift away from anthropocentrism to a more ecocentric perspective considers the world ‘an intrinsically dynamic interconnected web … in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between … the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman.’ The poem thus challenges the view that ‘being a speaking subject is jealously

---

7 Coleridge, Biographia I.84.
8 Buell, Environmental Imagination 102.
9 Buell, Environmental Imagination 98.
guarded as an exclusively human prerogative.’ Denying humankind’s predominant role, *Dart* rather suggests a kind of ontological humility that is founded on an equality in which the anthropocentric and the ecocentric reconcile in an environmental perspective. As a result, Oswald’s ‘making the inarticulate articulate … emphasizes the need for the human and the natural worlds to be on respectful terms with one another.’

The *adéquation* between voice and river is based on the fact that both entities are in constant flux; the one of streaming water, the other of flowing words. Indeed, the poem begins with the assertion that the Dart is ‘lying low in darkness … trying to summon itself by speaking’ which directly establishes a congruence between speech and river as their origin is based on a mutual evocation; the river begins to emanate as the voice starts to sound and vice versa. In addition, the murkiness in which the river lies corresponds to the indeterminable source of speech where a transformation occurs from the material organ into sound in the act of pronunciation. This vagueness is emphasised by the very first line of the poem: ‘Who’s this moving alive over the moor?’ (1) Beginning with a question, the Dart’s first mutterings reflect its obscure source from which both, voice and river, start to manifest themselves. Their dynamic and unfettered flow throughout the poem is mirrored by the almost complete absence of punctuation. Ben Smith appositely recapitulates these textual equivalents of the river: ‘Writing with total accuracy about water may prove impossible, but Oswald’s use of the songline affords her an alternative method, allowing her to write with water by replicating its movements and forms.’

This apparent instance of *adéquation* is underscored by the fact that every human voice naturally possesses a unique rhythm and intonation which, according to Theodor Schwenk, can be observed in streams, too: ‘The rhythm of its meanders is a part of the individual nature of a river. In a wide valley a river will swing in far-flung curves, whereas a narrow valley will cause it to wind to and fro in a “faster” rhythm.’ Connected to the energetic movement of the river, this rhythm is never static but constantly changes, which is reflected in the poem’s form. Instead of having one stable metre or shape, it alternates between ‘long and short lined verse, prose poetry, rhyming couplets, stanzas with repeated refrains and even the fixed forms of sonnets and ballads.’ In consequence, these textual equivalents of the river’s natural flux give the impression that it [the poem] is constantly in motion, like the river itself, and impart a profoundly dynamic sense … of collisions and confluences.

Moreover, an analogy can be established between the river and the stream of thought since speech is principally based on the conceptual structure of the understanding. Schwenk points out

---

14 Manes 15.
16 Alice Oswald, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) 1. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.
20 Smith 66.

Marvin Reimann. “‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s *Dart*.’ *Transnational Literature* Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
that ‘the activity of thinking is essentially an expression of flowing movement. … The capacity of water in the realm of substance to dissolve and bind together reappears in thinking as a spiritual activity.’22 Through the Dart’s lively flow corresponding to an incessant stream-of-consciousness, the river’s spiritual essence and the animistic principle in Oswald’s poem become even more apparent. In one passage, the Dart reflects on its own being as a constant stream, which illustrates the interconnectedness between flux, thought and voice:

why is this jostling procession of waters,
its many strands overclambering one another,
so many word-marks, momentary traces
in wind-script of the world’s voices
...
why is it so sedulously clattering
so like a man mechanically muttering
so sighing, so endlessly seeking
to hinge his fantasies to his speaking (42)

Evident at first sight is the constant use of progressive participles, which in the second half of the quote create a parallelism and two rhyming couplets, thus emphasising the incessant flow of the river. This flux is personified when the waters are said to scramble and climb over each other, which renders it more intuitively palpable as this personification reveals a subtle identification between nature and humanity. This is even more stressed in the following two lines when these movements are compared with a multitude of words read aloud by the voices of the world. Hence, one could argue that the liquid stream of the Dart, which simultaneously constitutes its voice, expresses these words by virtue of its flowing motion. That it does in fact speak is illustrated by a simile in the second half of the quote likening the river to a ‘man mechanically muttering’. The alliterative and onomatopoetic character of this line – as well as that of the accumulation of ‘s’-sounds in the subsequent one emphasising the river’s sighs – mirrors the audibility of the Dart’s speech. A few lines further on the Dart is

so caught in this dialogue that keeps
washing into the cracks of their lips
and spinning in the small hollows
of their ears and egos
this huge vascular structure (42)

The use of enjambements intricately connecting every line underscores the stream’s meandering and, metaphorically, its interweaving with the human voices. This process is illustrated with words from the semantic field of nature so that speaking is seen in natural terms like a liquid flow of words and phrases. The following lines describe human corporeality – the blood vessels – being permeated by the streams of water, thereby underlining the life-giving character of the river. Referring to this issue, Schwenk explains that water does indeed interconnect the environment and all living creatures in it because they ‘are vascular systems through which

22 Schwenk 96-97.

Marvin Reimann. “‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s Dart.’ Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
water, the blood of the earth, streams in living interplay with the atmosphere. Together earth, plant world and atmosphere form a single great organism, in which water streams like living blood. Apart from this physical dimension, the Dart also pervades everyone’s ego, which, on the one hand, equates the river’s fluidity with the human stream-of-consciousness and, on the other, portrays every single self as essentially being a part in this universal stream.

Since the river is portrayed as an animate and personified entity that can think and speak as it flows, one could go so far as to ascribe an inner self to it. According to the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, however, a self hidden beneath a surface remains a not fully realised one since its completion requires an act of becoming aware of itself. Applying Hegel’s general thoughts to the poem as a whole, one could argue that the river’s voice and the many individual voices it comprises are dialectically related, thus establishing a dynamic movement of self-reflection. The one cannot articulate itself without the other. The river, in expressing itself through the people’s voices, comes out of itself and finds itself in the other so that it can also recognise itself through the other. Its self-reflection is achieved because all human voices, which alternately emerge during its flow, constantly refer to the Dart so that the river is confronted with itself through the other. By this process of othering, the Dart simultaneously suspends its otherness and comes back to itself on a higher level of consciousness. Having incorporated the other in itself, it is no longer merely in itself but also for itself. It has attained self-awareness through a reciprocal and intersubjective movement. Concurrently, this dialectic applies to the human speakers, too, because their self-consciousnesses can only be achieved when their voices partake in the river’s self-reflection and are dissolved in the all-embracing speech of the Dart. The result is an essentially interdependent relation between humans and river that is based on a mutual recognition of the other as the vital prerequisite for their full realisation. Hegel connects this interrelatedness with an underlying spirit:

> With this, we already have before us the Notion of Spirit. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’.

Indeed, the Dart can only be an I or a self because it simultaneously is a We, meaning that intersubjectivity and subjectivity stand in a reciprocal relation. Coleridge aptly calls this holistic principle ‘unity in multiplicity,’ by which he does not maintain that oneness entails indifference and uniformity. Instead, this principle unifies the diversity of numerous elements striving for individuation under one living and perpetually expanding wholeness. This self-generation also pertains to the liquid self of the Dart, which is never stagnant. Instead, it is a continuous process, a ‘state of being-towards,’ constantly propelled by the dialectic mirroring between humans

---

23 Schwenk 14.
25 Hegel 110.
and river. Otherwise, it would cease to be a complete self: ‘For the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.’ 28 Wholeness must necessarily incorporate its own process of becoming, which signifies its vividness in the first place.

This incessant mutability furthermore denies the river a stable identity that can be entirely determined. 29 Rather, its identity consists in the very fact that it perpetually transforms itself. These observations lead Smith to the assertion that the river functions ‘as a creative border space where the boundaries between self, voice and environment become blurred. … the river Dart becomes a space of transformation, where Oswald draws on the classical theme of metamorphosis.’ 30 The principle of metamorphosis becomes more apparent with regard to the poem’s persona. Although the first-person pronoun continuously emerges throughout the songline, it does not signify one single and stable persona; instead, it constitutes a variable that can stand for different subjectivities as they come and go with the river’s flow. 31 Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish between the speaking subjects because they always reveal their individuality through their idiosyncratic use of language including rhythm, vocabulary and grammar. An example of this can be observed at the beginning of the poem when the walker’s voice merges into the river’s:

An old man, fifty years a mountaineer, until my heart gave out,
so now I’ve taken to the moors. I’ve done all the walks, the Two Moors Way, the Tors, this long winding line the Dart

this secret buried in reeds at the beginning of sound I
won’t let go of man, under
his soakaway ears and his eye ledges working
into the drift of his thinking, wanting his heart

While the walker thematises the river by referring to its meandering movement, he himself becomes a part of its stream when the first-person pronoun changes into that of the Dart speaking. As soon as the river slips into the role of the speaker, it rises from the reeds and becomes alive through self-articulation, the beginning of sound. Moreover, the Dart underscores its fusion with the walker when explaining that it enters his mind, which again links it to the stream of thought. Yet, not only do they coalesce on a spiritual level but on an emotional one as well. In the first line of the quote, the walker states that ‘his heart gave out’, meaning that he himself offers his heart to the river, which, as the latter maintains in the last line, is what it basically intends. Thus, the greater self that results from the interrelation between Dart and walker can be seen as an entity that preserves each of its elements even beyond death. The lack of punctuation, the use of enjambments and participles textually mirror the dynamic flow of the river and its fluid, hence almost unnoticeable, metamorphosis. Notwithstanding these unifying elements, the singularity of both, walker and river, can be perceived, too. The former’s speech is

28 Hegel 2.
29 Drangsholt 174.
30 Smith 59.
31 Yeung 204.

quite prosaic, easily comprehensible and possesses a clearly structured syntax whereas the latter’s voice is much more poetic and grammatically intricate. Every individual is incorporated into the Dart’s process of becoming when the river itself makes this the theme of its self-reflexive speech on the poem’s last page:

This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy,

all names, all voices, Slip-Shape, this is Proteus,
whoever that is, the shepherd of the seals,
driving my many selves from cave to cave … (48)

Even though the Dart defies a precise self-designation, it does not reject identity. Rather, these lines illustrate ‘an affirmation of identity as a process of becoming.’ By referring to the Greek god Proteus, who is capable of assuming various shapes, the river identifies its own changeability as the vital prerequisite for creating a self in the first place. It is crucial that this insight occurs at the end of the poem because the dialectical progress has now passed through every speaker, thus culminating in the attainment of self-consciousness. This self is necessarily intersubjective because it comprises many selves between which it must alternate in order to dynamically reflect on itself. Hence, the Dart’s speech is a soliloquy because it is spoken by a unity in multeity, one voice comprising all the other voices. Moreover, animals are included in this interaction since they are inspirited as well. By asserting that it represents the ‘shepherd’ of the seals and selves, the Dart further stresses its essential role in the process of creating an interdependent organism.

In addition, this polymorphous character is emphasised by the three dots at the end that ‘manifest the mobility and mutability of a poetic discourse’ so that ‘instead of confirming its own ending and finality, it is subtly altered into the otherness of the page’s blankness.’ Words such as ‘anonymous’ and ‘whoever’ highlight the river’s elusive character transcending even the poem’s ending. Although the Dart dissolves into the sea, this does not mark the end of the river as there are still masses of water emanating from its source and people living with the river, thus rendering the Dart’s generation of self-consciousness an endlessly circulating process.

In addition to its spiritual dimension, the river’s physicality constitutes an essential feature because ‘the establishment of self is impossible without the context of place.’ The Dart can only interact with human beings as it is a spatial and material entity. Here, it is important to draw on Buell’s general distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’. The former is defined as being neutral and objective; the latter, in contrast, possesses ‘both an objective and a subjective face, pointing outward toward the tangible world and inward to the perceptions one brings to it.’ As a result, exteriority, materiality and objectivity are fused with their opposites interiority, spirituality and subjectivity in a sense of place. This also means that the mimetic element merges with the

32 Drangsholt 175.
33 Drangsholt 175.
36 Alexander 7.

poetic as only the combination of both is able to reveal humankind’s environmental bonding with nature. The person that ascribes certain emotions and memories to a particular location does not remain outside this place but shares its identity, the process of which can be seen as a metaphorical coalescence. In consequence, the distinction between humankind and nature becomes blurred again because their relation is not static but nascent. With regard to the Dart, this spiritual coalescence is only possible because every individual engages with the river via his or her body. Hence, Smith claims that ‘linguistic interaction can only take place because of the physical interactions of the speakers with their environment.’

One instance in which the corporeal union of human and nature can be observed is when the swimmer illustrates his diving into the Dart:

Then I jumped in a rush of gold to the head,  
through black and cold, red and cold, brown and warm,  
giving water the weight and size of myself in order to  
imagine it,  
water with my bones, water with my mouth and my understanding  
when my body was in some way a wave to swim in,  
one continuous fin from head to tail

...  
He dives, he shuts himself in a deep soft-bottomed silence  
which underwater is all nectarine, nacreous. (22-23)

The swimmer experiences his immersion into water synaesthetically as it first provides visual as well as tactile and later also auditory and gustatory stimuli resulting in a ‘perceptual blurring’ in which all elements ‘conflate.’ Through these mixed sensations, his whole body becomes one with the water around him, thus exhibiting ‘a nuanced awareness of the crucial role played by the body in mediating experiences of place, and of the human senses as interfaces between any notional inner self and the world outside.’ The swimmer himself reflects on this role of corporeal sensation when he considers the contact with water as a transfer of his own weight onto the river that is necessary in order to imagine the Dart. In doing so, he establishes an essential connection between sensuality and imagination because the former stimulates the latter, the combination of which subsequently entails a fusion of both.

The distinction between internal self and external world dissolves, which results in the creation of a greater entity. This is stressed by the following parallelism in which the swimmer compares water with his bones, mouth and understanding, thus taking up the idea of a correlation between stream and thought. Moreover, the poem enhances the sensation of the river on an onomatopoetic level. First, the sharp sounds of ‘black’ and ‘cold’ underscore the sudden

---

37 Smith 61.  
38 Yeung 218.  
39 Alexander 11.  
40 Tom Bristow, “‘Contracted to an eye-quiet world’: Sonic Census and Poetics of Place in Alice Oswald,” SYMBIOSIS 10.2 (2006) 167-185, 18 July 2016. 177. Here, one could again argue that the mimetic and the poetic element merge.

Marvin Reimann. “‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s Dart’. Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.  
chilly feeling when plunging into the water, whereas the following ‘w’- and ‘m’-sounds evoke a
sense of warmth and softness mirroring the swimmer merging with the embracing river. In
addition, the swimmer emphasises his entering the stream by the metaphorical transformation of
his own body into a wave in which he can swim, meaning that he is at the same time in and out
of himself so that the river becomes an extension of him in which he can find himself.41 This
metamorphosis is fully achieved when the persona shifts again from the human into the Dart as
pointed out in the last two lines spoken by the river. Hence, the Dart functions as a means for
humans to leave their anthropocentric perspective and enter their fluid environment, thus fully
becoming one with it. This also entails a different view on oneself since it incorporates the other
in humankind’s sublated self-consciousness.

Even though the Dart can be viewed as a topographical presence experienced through human
corporeality, place is not merely static but always subject to time as well. A place might remain
one location in space but constantly changes as it ‘is not entitative – as a foundation has to be –
but eventmental, something in process.’42 This observation becomes particularly apparent when
viewing it in relation to the river. Due to its characteristic fluidity, mobility and mutability, one
could even claim that ‘water becomes an image of the stream of time itself, permeated with the
rhythms of the starry world. All the creatures of the earth live in this stream of time, it flows
within them, and, as long as it flows, sustains them in the stream of life.’43 The Dart circulates
through each person that appears in the poem and preserves their selves through time in its
vivifying waters. By embodying the stream of time itself, the river transcends its limits and
becomes eternal because it is not a single and separated segment in time but duration itself. The
connection between temporality, life and the infinite becomes evident when examining the many
deaths that are presented in the poem. The first one mentioned is known as the folkloristic
legend of Jan Coo:

Next morning it came home to us that he was drowned.
He should never have swum on his own.
Now he’s so thin you can see the light
through his skin, you can see the filth in his midriff.

Now he’s the groom of the Dart - I’ve seen him
taking the shape of the sky, a bird, a blade,
a fallen leaf, a stone – may he lie long
in the inexplicable knot of the river’s body (4)

While, in the first two lines, Jan Coo’s death is described in a quite prosaic and matter-of-fact
way clearly stressing the elimination of life, the subsequent lines are more poetic and present it
in the light of natural regeneration. His corporeal dissolution is emphasised through his skin’s
increasing transparency, an indication of organic decay. The mentioning of light shining through
his suspending body, however, can be read as a spiritual form of celestial light permeating his
essence. The following lines underscore this thought since they illustrate the drowning of Jan

41 Bristow 178.
42 Edward Casey, The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 337.
43 Schwenk 68.

Marvin Reimann. “‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’: The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of
Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s Dart.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
Coo as a marriage. The focus on his physicality is superseded by his spirituality which is sublated in its communion with the river.\textsuperscript{44} This also allows for Jan Coo’s shape-shifting character through which he is able to re-emerge as various natural phenomena. The enumeration of these elements takes place on a perpendicular axis, slowly descending from the sky to the bed of the river, thus creating a vertical connection between the Dart and the celestial realm.

In the light of these assertions, Jan Coo seems to personify the animistic spirit that pervades all nature and, in doing so, functions as the link between humans and their environment. In consequence, his death and natural resurrection can be perceived as a cyclical movement that is inherent in the natural stream of the river. It starts from its obscure source, flows towards the sea, is transported into the air through evaporation and comes down to earth as rain, thus completing its perpetual cycle before it starts anew. Through this infinite movement, the river is elevated beyond time and gives eternal life to the beings it permeates. These ideas gain more importance with regard to the Dart’s mythological dimension, which becomes obvious when the water nymph – itself a mythical being – speaks to the forester:

\begin{quote}
woodman working in the twilight
you should see me in the moonlight
comb my cataract of hair,
at work all night on my desire

oh I could sing a song of Hylas,
how the water wooed him senseless,
I could sing the welded kiss
continuous of Salmacis (12)
\end{quote}

Similar to the legend of Jan Coo, this section presents the river as a female – personified through the water nymph – whose relation to the human is still passionate but not marital as above. The nymph’s seductive playing with her hair, the torrents of the river, merges into an allusion to the mythological Hylas in the following stanza.\textsuperscript{45} According to Theocritus, the beautiful Hylas is tempted by water nymphs, who finally succeed in dragging him down into their pond so that he is never seen again. Even though this myth illustrates the disintegration of Hylas’ worldly existence, it does not signify the end of his spiritual self because his soul becomes one with the fountain and therefore immortal like the nymphs inhabiting it.\textsuperscript{46}

In \textit{Dart}, the erotic atmosphere continues as it tells of the water’s wooing and the fusing kiss of Salmacis. In his \textit{Metamorphoses}, Ovid describes how Hermaphroditus by chance encounters the fertile and pure fountain of the Naiad Salmacis who, again due to the male’s beauty, instantly falls in love with him. As he eventually enters her stream, she entwines his body and, ‘piercing each the other’s flesh, they run / Together, and incorporate in one’ so that ‘both bodies in a single body mix, / A single body with a double sex.’\textsuperscript{47}

In consequence, one could argue that these two instances underscore the general topos of

\begin{footnotes}
\item 44 Yeung 209.
\item 45 One could further argue that the constant trochaic tetrameter creates a melody and rhythm which are as mesmerising as the wooing nymph.
\end{footnotes}
metamorphosis in the poem since the Dart as well as its inhabitants perpetually have to transform themselves in their dialectical interrelatedness in order to generate a greater whole. Charles Tomlinson further highlights this thought by arguing that “the wisdom of The Metamorphoses inheres in it an imaginative vision of a world where all things are interrelated, where flesh and blood are near kin to soil and river.” Thus, the sense of nature’s animistic essence is implied through these two allusions, which entails a transcending of physical death because the person’s spirit, fused with the river, continues to live and to speak. Moreover, these references enhance the idea of immortality because myths, even though they take place in a transient world, are regarded as stories whose contents are elevated beyond the temporal dimension since they illustrate archetypal patterns.

After the voice of the water nymph has changed into that of the forester and then back again, it prays to such mythical figures as the ‘Rex Nemorensis’ and the ‘Flumen Dialis’, which can indeed be regarded as an allusion to James George Frazer’s seminal work The Golden Bough. In this comparative study of various religions, Frazer explains that the Rex Nemorensis is a priest and a king who leads a cult worshipping the goddess Diana in a sacred grove of oaks at the lake of Nemi. There, he has to defend a sacred tree from which no branch is allowed to be broken. If, however, a runaway slave succeeds in doing so, he is entitled to kill the current King of the Wood and hold his office instead until he is slain by another one and so on. Due to the cyclical nature of this office, Frazer associates it with pre-ancient fertility rites in which sacred kings like the Rex Nemorensis represent worldly incarnations of certain deities who have to be sacrificed in autumn and resurrected in spring in order to regain the vegetative fertility essential for the people to survive. These religious rites are not only connected with the cyclical processes of nature but also with spiritual fertility as each resurrection means a spiritual elevation of the cult’s members as well. In addition, Oswald’s ‘Flumen Dialis’ alludes to the Roman priest of Jupiter, the Flamen Dialis, who celebrates the sacred marriage of Jupiter and Juno by personifying the god while his bride embodies the goddess. Frazer further points out that, because Juno and Jupiter are both oak-gods, this ritual takes place in a grove of oaks, which establishes a connection between sexual and vegetative fertility.

Relating these two examples to the Dart, it becomes apparent that ‘this part of the poem is a prayer for renewal and resurrection, for continued circularity and the eternal return of everything. While the river takes life, it also gives it back.’ The fact that Oswald replaces the word ‘Flamen’ with ‘Flumen’, which is Latin for ‘river’, underscores the river’s mythological character and its inherent fertility. Like the office of the Rex Nemorensis, the poem’s first-person pronoun remains constant but the speaker who fills it continually changes. These metamorphoses transcend death because the river provides every being with eternal life. This theme can also be regarded from a less spiritual point of view since, ‘in Dart, death is figured as just another stage in the interplay of self and environment seen at an ecological scale. It is another everyday

49 Smith 70.
50 Oswald 13.
52 Frazer 360.
53 Frazer 380-382.
54 Drangsholt 12-13.
transformation.” From an ecological perspective, the death of a human being does not signify a tragedy as it would from the anthropocentric view. Instead, life and death are both merely seen as phases in the natural cycle of the universe, which sublates all lives and deaths in its perpetual stream. Recalling the incessant flow of the Dart as a metaphor of this movement, the relativity of a human being’s death becomes even more apparent as the river has been in existence before humanity and will continue to exist.

In conclusion, Oswald’s imaginative poetisation of the Dart through its self-articulation functions as a vivid *adéquation* of the river that reveals the animistic essence it fundamentally shares with humankind. She unveils this environmental bonding by portraying the stream as a spiritual, physical and temporal entity which achieves its full realisation only in constant interaction with humans. Likewise, this interrelatedness constitutes the vital prerequisite for the completion of any human being that lives with the river because otherwise, every person would be deprived of self-consciousness, an identity as well as a sense of place. As a result, the self-articulation of the Dart reveals that neither an anthropocentric nor an ecocentric view can guarantee the future sustainability of either element. Both must have their voice and they must coalesce into one so that the whole can be greater than the mere sum of its parts.

---

**Marvin Reimann** is currently finishing his master’s degree in English Literatures and Cultures at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. He received his bachelor’s degree in English Studies and Philosophy from the same university in April 2015. His master’s thesis as well as his research interests in general focus on the interrelation between English Romantic literature and the philosophy of German Idealism and Early German Romanticism. He has been working as a tutor at the English Department for three years, teaching introductory courses on literary studies for students in their first and second semester.

---

55 Smith 70.

Works Cited


Marvin Reimann. “‘This is me, anonymous, water’s soliloquy’; The River’s Voice as a Coalescence of Humankind and Nature in Alice Oswald’s *Dart.*” *Transnational Literature* Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick*

Lotta Schneidemesser

University of York

Abstract

This paper will introduce the young Samoan poet Courtney Sina Meredith and her debut poetry collection *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* which casts a new light on women with a Pacific or Samoan background and gives the reader a direct, and blunt, yet also a poetic insight into urban life in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Coming from the poetry slam scene and having grown up in Auckland (a city with 2 million inhabitants and a large Pacific Island community), Meredith’s poetry creates an interplay of philosophical, poetic observations and depictions of modern society, and urban life and questions the role of women in today’s society.

As a translator, I am particularly interested in the challenges that arise when translating not just from one language to another (in this case from English, interwoven with Samoan words and concepts, to German), but especially from one culture to another culture. According to Umberto Eco, “translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures…. A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural.” Therefore, this paper will also address the importance of the translator when it comes to enabling readers in various parts of the world access to literature from a culture that is not their own. This paper aims to give an insight into contemporary Samoan poetry by introducing one of New Zealand’s aspiring young poets and to discuss the questions and difficulties that arise when translating her poetry into German.

** * * * * *

‘Translation is always a shift, not between two languages but between two cultures .... A translator must take into account rules that are not strictly linguistic but, broadly speaking, cultural.’

This quotation by Umberto Eco serves as a starting point for this paper, as it raises fundamental questions that deal with the core of the translation process. Or, in other words: when trying to find a voice for a writer in a language other than his or her mother tongue. When translating something from one language into another, is this enrichment, does one gain something, such as a better understanding? Or is translation always a loss if we assume that the translator will never manage to capture every aspect of the original text in his or her translation? In order to explore these questions, I will focus on Courtney Sina Meredith and the themes of her writing in the first part of this article; in the second part, I will offer an insight into my translation process and

---


provide concrete translation examples and decisions, and also address the importance of the translator in the context of postcolonial literature. I will try to make it transparent why, even though, at a first glance, it might sometimes seem as if something is ‘lost in translation’, I think that a good translation is an enrichment, not only for the reader but also for the original text. There is a kind of transformation, of dialectic happening during the translation process – some aspect of the original text might have to be neglected, and might consequently appear to be ‘lost’ in the translated text in order to gain, to create something new. This is an idea that Walter Benjamin discusses in great detail in his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, in which he argues that literature in translation should be acknowledged as its very own genre, precisely because it will always be different to the original.²

In this article, I want to focus on Courtney Sina Meredith’s first poetry collection Brown Girls with Bright Red Lipstick (2012),³ and in particular on five poems that I have chosen for a translation and a closer analysis. Even though the thirty-six poems of this collection imply a connected whole, these five poems reveal distinct features that occur throughout the different poems of the collection and provide a deep insight into topics such as the meaning and the lived experience of identity, language and culture, and the contrast between a traditional life and a modern urban life. In order to conduct this analytical work, I will first contextualize Meredith’s poetry collection with regard to its position within the tradition of Māori and Pacific literature. The clarification of this background discussion will provide a basis for the following close reading of selected poems from Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.

I distinctly remember hearing Meredith’s voice for the first time. It was in Frankfurt, at the world’s largest book fair, in October 2012, when New Zealand was the guest of honour (German: Ehrengast). Meredith opened the Book Fair with a performance of a Kapa Haka group, that performed traditional Māori and Polynesian dance. Her voice was clear and strong and captured everyone in the audience. In much the same way, the voice in her poems captured me the first time that I read them. In her poems, Meredith plays with rhythm and sounds, with rhyme and double meanings – when hearing her perform her poetry, one realises that this poetry was not written purely for the page but is meant to be spoken in the presence of an audience.

Meredith’s poetry has complex political and cultural implications; by other contemporary poets from Aotearoa New Zealand, she has been adored as ‘leader of a new generation of writers and performance artists gracing our poetry’ while her voice is described as being ‘an exciting addition to New Zealand and Pacific literature’ (Meredith 7). Meredith’s poems deal with identity and authenticity, with the meaning of language and culture, of home, of change, of relationships and the contrast between past and present. However, they do so in a very literary, distinctly poetic way.

A few remarks locating Meredith’s poetry within the tradition of Māori- and Samoan literature will illustrate that even though her poems sometimes describe an unfamiliar setting or cultural concept, they deal with timeless, universal themes that touch not only on Māori or Samoan culture, but on any culture. They are not entirely bound up with a certain time or a certain place but are transcultural. With this article, I hope to interest readers in contemporary

³ Courtney S. Meredith, Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick (Auckland, NZ: Beatnik Pub., 2012). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
New Zealand poetry and to provide a point of view that helps them to develop a deeper understanding of Māori and Samoan writing.

Meredith’s poetry collection *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* is a very promising debut in contemporary literature from Aotearoa New Zealand. Meredith was born in 1986 in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; she has Samoan parents and belongs to the Pacific Island Community of Aotearoa New Zealand. About 8% of the population of Aotearoa New Zealand have a Pacific Island background, which means that they or their ancestors had immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand from the Pacific Islands, such as Samoa, Tonga, Fiji or the Cook Islands. About two thirds (67%) of the Pacific Island Community live in Auckland and the surrounding area. Being Samoan, Meredith belongs to the largest group within the Pacific Island Community and is recognized as one of the aspiring writers of the New Zealand literature scene. She has received accolades in the form of awards for her performances at poetry slams and for her first theatre play, *Rushing Dolls* (part of the play collection *Urbanesia*, 2011), and, in 2011, also became the ‘Writer in Residence’ of the LiteraturRaum Bleibtreu in Berlin as the first Pacific Island artist and the youngest artist ever to be awarded this residency. *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* (Beatnik Publishing, 2012) is her first poetry collection in print. In August 2016, Meredith published her first short story collection *A Tail of a Taniwha* and received the prestigious Iowa writer’s fellowship.

*Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* is a collection of poems that cast a new light on women with a Pacific or Samoan background and gives the reader a direct, and blunt, yet poetic insight into urban life in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Coming from the poetry slam scene and having grown up in Auckland (a city with 2 million inhabitants and a large Pacific Island community), her poetry captivates with colloquial, rhythmic but sometimes also drastic language, which may create a sense of stunning distance in the reader. Her poetry creates an interplay of personal reflections, philosophical, poetic observations and depictions of modern society and urban life including the role of women in today’s society and alludes to Samoan, Polynesian and Māori culture, but also Western culture.

Meredith’s poems reveal the current search for identity by young women (but also by young people in general), especially those who have a Pacific-, Samoan- and Māori-background, and *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick* provides an impressive insight into the situation of young people with a Pacific-, Samoan- and Māori-background in New Zealand. Meredith gives a voice to this generation and expresses their hopes, worries and dreams. Meredith herself describes her oeuvre as an on-going discussion of contemporary urban life with an underlying Pacific politque.

For the German translation of her work, I have chosen five poems, in which Meredith’s rhythmic language, her fondness for ambiguities and elaborate wordplays and her artful rhymes come to expression. The underlying style of the translation is created through an aesthetic, intercultural dialogue between the original and the translation. This means that, as a translator, it is my aim to understand and to analyse how Meredith mirrors certain cultural foundations, such as for example what it means to be Samoan and to grow up in a Samoan family and community, by using literary and artistic means – and to convey it to the reader of the translation.

For example, in the poem ‘Aitu’ (Meredith 39), I have very consciously decided not to translate the word ‘aitu’ – but to leave it as it is in order to create a dialogue between the original, the translation and the reader.
Crickets sing  
aitu moves in the trees  
sacred things play dead  
taking sight in the light night  
crickets sing for me

If the reader wants to understand what the word ‘aitu’ means, and to understand the context, he or she has to make an effort to try and find out. The task of a translator is also that of a mediator: on the one hand, the translation has to give the reader an opportunity to understand words or concepts that are unfamiliar, but on the other hand, the translator also has to be careful not to reveal too much and to intervene too strongly. Additionally, the style of the author needs to be retained. In this passage, for an attentive reader unfamiliar with Samoan culture, it becomes clear from the context that ‘aitu’ is a noun, and that it is someone or something that can move or is moved; not on the earth, but in trees. The reader has probably only a vague picture in mind. However, he or she is able to picture something, despite the lack of an explicit explanation. I have opted against providing footnotes within the poems or the translation, as I believe that this would be at odds with the poetic structure of the poem – after all, a poem is not a scientific text, and a footnote always has an explanatory function, and adding a footnote alters the way the poem looks like on the page. Meredith’s poetry collection also provides a very brief glossary, which I have decided to translate, but in this article I have only included the words and concepts that actually appear in the poems that I have selected for translation. Thus, the poetic structure of the poem is respected, as well as the author’s decision to provide a glossary.

In my approach, I therefore follow Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who states that ‘there are two translation principles: one demands that the author from a foreign nation is brought to us in such a way that we can accept him as one of us; the other demands that we must move towards the foreign and discover its condition, its way of speaking, its characteristics.’ The first principle has a stronger focus on the target language and is also called ‘domestication’, whereas the second one, which is rather focused on the source language, is called ‘foreignization’.

There are strong dissensions among translators, scholars and critics, as some favour one principle over the other, and, depending on text and context, one might be more advisable than the other. The oldest document by a translator reflecting on this choice is a letter by Martin Luther written in 1530, when he translated the Bible from Ancient Greek and Latin into German and argued that ‘you have to ask the mother in her home, the children in the street and the common man in the market square – and listen to how they talk and then translate accordingly, so that they can understand it and realize that they are spoken to in their very own German language.’ He argued for the principle of domestication for the sake of being better understood.

---

My translation. German original: ‘Es gibt zwei Übersetzungsmaximen: die eine verlangt, dass der Autor einer fremden Nation zu uns herüber gebracht werde, dergestalt, dass wir ihn als den Unsrigen ansehen können; die andere hingegen macht an uns die Forderung, dass wir uns zu dem Fremden hinüber begeben, und uns in seine Zustände, seine Sprachweise, seine Eigenheiten finden sollen.’

by his target audience. Other scholars, such as Lawrence Venuti, a theorist and historian of translation, strongly argue against it and favours the ‘foreignizing’ approach, claiming that ‘communication here is initiated and controlled by the target-language culture, it is in fact an interested interpretation, and therefore it seems less an exchange of information than an appropriation of a foreign text for domestic purposes.’

As with other Māori and Samoan authors before her (e.g. Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, Robert Sullivan, Selina Tusitala Marsh), Meredith uses Samoan and Māori words as stylistic means, and as a clear political message. Literature by and about Māori, Samoans and Pacific Islanders is still marginalized in New Zealand, and by using Māori and Samoan words and cultural concepts, Meredith moves herself, her culture and her people into the centre. The way Samoan words are used in her poetry can be understood with a strong cultural but also political implication, because – as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue – ‘the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because while translation is not inadmissible in itself, glossing gives the translated word, and thus the receptor culture, the higher status.’ In postcolonial literature, language is not only strongly linked with identity construction, but it can also represent cultural consciousness and it is therefore a key factor in the minority’s struggle for recognition and self-determination. This can be found in Meredith’s writing, and in that of many writers with an indigenous background from a formerly colonized country.

I would like to examine the significance of language with regard to the construction and definition of identity in a postcolonial context, as it is central to Meredith, who has Samoan parents but grew up in an urban environment in New Zealand. Even though in Meredith’s poetry this might not be as visible as in the writing of for example Patricia Grace, Hone Tuwhāre, Albert Wendt or Witi Ihimaera, who in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the first Māori and Samoan writers to be published, it is important to note that Meredith, with her Samoan ancestry, comes from a distinct tradition of Pacific storytelling and writing. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, defines the meaning of language in relation to the sense of identity by observing that ‘the choice of language and the use to which language is put are central to a people’s definition of itself in relation to its natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe.’

Given that language is strongly linked to identity and to ways of perceiving the world around us, the use of language in Meredith’s poems can be seen as a political gesture, indicating ‘difference, separation and absence from the metropolitan norm’ and thus signalling a movement which ‘illustrates and initiates resistance to superimposed norms, leading to re-integration into society and a re-construction of identity.’

My translation. German original: ‘Man mus die mutter jhm hause/ die kinder auff der gassen/ den gemeinen mann auff dem marckt drumb fragen/ und den selbigen auff das maul sehen/ wie sie reden/ und darnach dolmetzschen/ so verstehen sie es den/ und mercken/ das man Deutsch mit jn redet.’

9 Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 44.
In the 1970s, Samoan and Māori writers writing about their own culture were a novelty in New Zealand literature. Although Meredith does not belong to the first generation of Māori and Samoan writers, it is a political act that she places her own traditions and cultural experiences at the centre of her poetry. The earlier Māori and Samoan writers, who were published in the 1960s and 70s, had a great impact on subsequent younger Māori and Samoan writers, as scholars like Paola Della Valle emphasise.

these texts ... [marked] radical changes in the literary as well as social domain. They opposed any monocentric view on reality and showed the potential of alternative values. ... They redefined the position of Māori in relation to Pākehā and, by doing so, forced Pākehā to do the same, underpinning the importance of literary texts as ideological discourse.11

This is underlined by Witi Ihimaera who argues that ‘the advent of Māori writers brought new perspectives on [Māori]’, because ‘in most cases, the Māori came in from the margins of Pākehā stories to the centre of their own Māori stories.’13 This movement of Māori characters and Māori culture and language from the periphery to the centre of stories and novels is a crucial narrative realignment, which also occurred in Samoan and Pacific literature.

Patricia Grace herself explains this movement from periphery to centre in her stories in one of her interviews:

There are characters that haven’t been written about, there’s language that hasn’t been used in writing, customs that haven’t been exposed. We have our own interrelationships, our own view of the world, our own spirituality. We have our own ancestors, our own legacy of stories. We have our own particular culture to draw from.14

Even though almost four decades have passed between the publication of Patricia Grace’s first short story collection Waiariki (1975) and Meredith’s poetry collection Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick (2012), Grace’s statement still holds true for Meredith’s writing in so far as Meredith explores the voice of young people with Samoan or Pacific ancestry who challenge traditions, who explore their sexuality and who are, even today, after all poetic efforts, only insufficiently represented in literature. Meredith is the strong voice of a new generation of young people who are aware of their Samoan and Pacific roots, culture and identity – but who are, at the same time, looking for their own identity in the twenty-first century. I consider it to be important that her poetry speaks not only to an English-speaking audience, but to all those young people in this world who are dealing with similar themes and struggles. Therefore, I have decided to find a German voice for Meredith poems.

13 Ihimaera, Witi, Where’s Waari?: A History of the Māori through the Short Story (Auckland, NZ: Reed 2000) 11.
From a translator’s perspective, what is most intriguing about Meredith’s poems and especially her poetry collection Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick is that it is such a challenge to translate them. Take for example the following lines:

the cast moon doesn’t
muck around the meringue peaks beneath
(line 42 - 43 in the poem ‘Rushing Doll’) (Meredith 51)

In this case, as well as in many others, it was already rather difficult to even create a clear picture in mind of what is being said or of the image that is created here. Consequently, it seemed almost impossible to create a German translation. In this case, it is an advantage that I am in contact with Meredith and can therefore ask her for advice or describe what I understand and confirm whether I am on the right track. In general, Roland Barthes’s concept of the death of the author makes sense to only very few translators. This is not the only possible approach to translation – but I, for my part, have decided to accept authorial intention as definitive for the purpose of trying to recreate the author’s work in a different language, and have found communicating with the authors I am translating to clarify certain aspects very enriching. When asking her about the lines mentioned above, her answer was the following:

I mean the moon, cast into the sky - the present moon - in all its glory still cannot change the course of the land - when I speak of meringue peaks - I mean the peaks of mountains – when they are shrouded with cloud, how it looks just like lemon meringue pie – the peaks that stiff egg whites make.’ (Meredith, in an email, March 2013).

Despite the fact that I could assure I would convey the correct meaning, the translation still proved to be very difficult, as it seemed impossible to put the image into such poignant words in German. At first, I decided to translate them quite literally, trying to convey the picture that Meredith had explained in her email, but the lines became far too long and too complex, and read like this:

‘Der an den Himmel verbannte Mond ist nicht in der Lage
die Eiweiß-Gipfel unter ihm zu verändern’

Lemon Meringue Pie is a very common kind of pie in New Zealand – but it is not in Germany. Therefore, a German reader would not have been able to read the image that is created here in the same way that a reader from New Zealand could. Instead, I tried to concentrate more on the meaning rather than a literal translation, which is why one of the next versions of the translation reads as follows:

‘der Schatten des Monds verdeckt nicht mehr
wer ich wirklich bin’

This, of course, moves far away from the original, as it does not incorporate the image of the Meringue Peaks and gives instead an interpretation. However, to me it seemed to suit the overall theme of the poem about a true identity being hidden. This version also seemed to partly adopt the meaning of the two lines as Courtney had explained them in her email. It fits very nicely into the rest of the translation and also conveys the general theme of the poem. I still somewhat regret
not being able to incorporate the Meringue peak image in my translation. However, I do believe that, as a translator, one enjoys a certain poetic freedom, especially when translating poetry, and that sometimes one has to move away from a literal translation of a line in order to better capture the meaning of it. This is the very task of every translator: to find a new voice for the piece of writing, to recreate the fabric woven together by sounds, rhythm and meaning in another language – in this case to find a German voice for Meredith’s poems, which are written in English but interspersed with Samoan words. The translator’s own voice, which sometimes differs significantly from the voice of the author, can at times create the sense that the mediator becomes a new or second ‘author’.

In the following, I would like to have a closer look at some of Meredith’s poems. I will provide a detailed account of the translation process and explain difficulties I encountered and the solutions I opted for. Translating poetry is a special challenge, because in a poem, each word, each syllable has its own and special place and meaning. A translator of poetry therefore needs to be very precise, a perfectionist, because, in the translation, every word, every syllable has to have its place as well.

In the very first poem, entitled ‘Don’t trust a Samoan Girl’, Meredith takes up a challenging, slightly aggressive stance and confronts the reader through her colloquial language and her direct way of speaking:

Don’t trust a Samoan girl
She’ll eat your heart while you sleep
Until you are silt in the corners of pink state houses

the girls all lie they lie like me
all of us ones like us
in a group upright
sometimes wearing the same thing
we don’t speak the language
we laugh a lot

young guys in nightclubs in leather go off at us
drunk on mother tongue
they give you the drink in their hand
punch cars passing the road and always
someone’s brother

crying the Manu Sina
fucked up on K Road
doing the Manu Samoa
on the street on the fly

slapping themselves
until it hurts
until the girls
are red.

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
Meredith creates an image of young, Samoan women that is far away from the traditional imagination of what young Samoan women are supposed to be like – namely, subordinate in the family hierarchy, keeping to the unwritten rules of the Samoan community, obedient and caring daughters, helping in the kitchen and finally marrying someone who is also a Pacific Islander, preferably a husband the parents chose or at least agreed to. Even in the first lines of this very first poem, the author plays with sounds, rhythm and rhymes, with double meaning and words that have many different layers, which are complicated further when we remember that this is not poetry written for the page, but a poem Meredith performs at poetry slams and readings. Take, for example, the very first line: ‘Don’t trust a Samoan girl’. Depending on which word is emphasized, the line conveys a slightly different meaning. Whereas an emphasis on the first word (‘Don’t trust a Samoan girl’) lets the whole line sound like a warning, an emphasis on the second word (‘Don’t trust a Samoan girl’) gives it a slightly different meaning, basically saying that one can do a lot with or to a Samoan girl – except for trusting her. With an emphasis on the fourth word (‘Don’t trust a Samoan girl’), the line suddenly gets a racist undertone, very aggressive and confrontational, whereas an emphasis on the last word (Don’t trust a Samoan girl) adds something sexist to the racist tone. A simple shift of emphasis in the first line can therefore alter the entire perception of and the response to the poem.

In the second line, ‘She’ll eat your heart while you sleep’, the reader is confronted with many different sounds and assonances: eat at the beginning of the line shares an eye-rhyme with heart, though both words have a very different sound. Then again eat rhymes (at least roughly) with the last word of the line, sleep. A very emphatic pronunciation of the line reveals its particular rhythm.

In this poem, the Samoan Girls mentioned in the title play the main role – they seem to be young girls, who, on the one hand, seduce men, who lie, play games, fool around, pretend to be something they are not– on the other hand, they seem to be very fragile and vulnerable. As simple as the title might be in English, for a German translator it poses many difficulties – as it is often the case with the most simple, plain phrases. The simpler and more direct sentences are, the more complex is often the task of translating them. It starts with the fact that the German word for girl (Mädchen) has a much narrower semantic scope than the English word girl – meaning, in this case, that the German word rather refers to small children and does not really capture the sense of teenage girls, playing around, trying to engage with men – or women. Another difficulty is that in many of her poems, Meredith plays with gender, sexual allusions, erotic word plays and double meanings – as in line five of this poem: ‘in a group upright’. Even though the line refers to girls, there is still a very strong allusion to an erect phallus here, a strong sexual symbol. An English-speaking reader would probably immediately have the antonym (‘bent’) in mind and the erotic and sexual meaning it entails, namely a reference to people who are gay or lesbian. All this is almost impossible to capture in a single German word. It is unclear in this passage whether the main focus lies on sexuality or on a play with gender stereotypes. In this poem, the girls seem to behave very self-assured, even cheeky, when they are together, in a group, feeling very strong and self-confident, playing with the boys and their feelings.

Terms like Manu Sina, Manu Samoa and K Road make it apparent that, even though this scene could theoretically take place anywhere in the world where groups of young girls and boys go to nightclubs, this specific scene is set in a context where the adolescents are familiar with the
terms Manu Sina, Manu Samoa and K Road. K Road, for example, is ‘short for “Karangahape Road”, inner Auckland alternative-culture focal point’ (Meredith 63). Manu Samoa is a ‘warrior display, performed by Manu Samoa, the Samoan national rugby team’ and Manu Sina is the ‘iconic bird of Samoa; a white seagull’ (Meredith 63). Another interesting feature of the use of language in the poem is the element of self-reflexivity. Line four begins with a self-description, ‘the girls all lie they lie like me’ (Meredith 15), meaning that they either do not seem to care what they are saying or that they are telling falsehoods on purpose. Only a few lines further, the speaker points out that actually the girls don’t speak the language – although it remains unclear whether they simply cannot speak it (and if so, which language is being referred to here? Samoan? or English? Or a distinct group or body language?) (Meredith 15). Instead, they all laugh a lot, maybe out of insecurity, or maybe they even laugh at the others, the boys. Two lines further down, we encounter the expression ‘Drunk on mother tongue’ (Meredith 15). This can be translated into German in a quite straightforward way – but again raises many questions about what the adolescents’ mother tongue is, and what is implied here. As for the translation, I have been struggling especially with maintaining the short, poignant rhythm of the poem while at the same time finding an appropriate tone for the colloquial, slang-like speech. My Translation reads as follows:

**Trau keinem Samoanischen Girl**

sie verschlängelt dein Herz wenn du schläfst
bis du Schutt bist in den Ecken pinker Armmühlen

alle Girls lügen sie lügen wie ich
alle die sind wie wir
in einer stolzen Clique
mit denselben Klamotten
wir sprechen die Sprache nicht
wir lachen laut

Typen in Nachtclubs ganz in Leder machen uns an
besoffen von Muttersprache
sie geben dir Drinks aus ihrer Hand
rempeln gegen parkende Autos und immer
irgendjemandes Bruder

schreien wie Manu Sina
zugangelt auf der K Road
tanzen den Manu Samoa
auf der Straße auf die Schnelle

schlagen sich
bis es weh tut
bis die Girls
knallrot sind.

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.*’  
Some themes that were already discussed with regard to the poem ‘Don’t trust a Samoan Girl’ reoccur in a number of Meredith’s poems. This is the case, for example, in the poem ‘Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick’, where an image of young Samoan women is created that again contradicts expectations of what Samoan women are supposed to be like.

Brown girls in bright red lipstick
have you seen them
with their nice white boyfriends
paisley scarves on scarred shoulders
looking for their wings

Brown girls in bright red lipstick
Where the hell are they it’s Sunday
Driving 80s commodores
Knees dangling kitchen benches

Brown girls in bright red lipstick
have you seen them
with their nice white girlfriends
reading Pablo Neruda
on fire the crotch of suburbia

What’s inside her
Fingers Jesus penis
The old testament
She’s promised to a Tongan welder
Or a buff Cookie cliff diver

Brown girls in bright red lipstick
Have you seen them at the beaches
Drowned in virgin olive oil
Twirling their hair into soil

Brown girls in bright red lipstick
Rearranged up on stage
Making your soft brothers
Run broken home to mother

have you seen them washed in twilight
struck by hours and the colours
running like mascara
taking yet another lover
she can’t sleep she’s walking thunder

Brown girls in bright red lipstick
have you seen them in the kitchen
shucking mussels cutting chicken
egging on the lone horizon

her dark centipedes are hidden
Manu Sina’s glittered lace
are they veins or blue pathways
led to reddest change
(Meredith 42)

Whereas the first stanza already partly breaks with what is traditionally accepted (the boyfriends here are white, not Samoan or brown, as the girls), the second stanza completely disrupts this tradition or expectation by introducing girlfriends. Here, what is often found in Meredith’s poems becomes apparent: she plays with the readers’ expectations, only to disappoint them. Another common theme is that of sexuality and eroticism mentioned here very explicitly through the use of words such as ‘girlfriends’, ‘boyfriends’, ‘bright red lipstick’, ‘crotch’, etc. At the same time, there is also sadness, a vulnerability which is part of the image created. The girls have scars that they are covering with a scarf, they are ‘looking for their wings’, meaning they could be looking for a way to escape from where they are, for freedom. Again, the title poses many difficulties when trying to translate it into German. In German, one might use the equivalent word for ‘Black’ to refer to a person from a different ethnicity (but this is politically incorrect and generally regarded as an affront) but never the word ‘brown’. In Germany, brown as a colour is associated with Nazis and their politics, and if you use this word to describe someone, you are referring to his or her political background, not to ethnicity. Here, we can see very clearly the difficulty of how to translate references to certain colours, as different colours signal different things in different countries or cultures. The theme that can be very prominently found in this poem is that of young Pacific women, torn between their love life and desires and their family and family relationships.

The last three lines of this poem are intriguing, difficult to understand and to interpret.

Manu Sina’s glittered lace
are they veins or blue pathways
led to reddest change

Robert Sullivan writes about these three lines in his introduction to Meredith’s poetry collection, saying

Meredith ends her poem with an animating tatau .... It’s a fine note on which to end the poem, one that promises fresh energy through the breathing lines, and change, through using the centipede form of the tatau which has its own long history. [She] embraces the tattooing traditions along lip-gloss and other western skin traditions with a completely metropolitan sensibility. (Meredith 8)

Sullivan refers to the traditional Samoan art of tattooing here. The English word tattoo is in fact believed to derive from the Polynesian word tatau.

My translation is an attempt to negotiate all of these issues:

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift
hast du sie gesehen
mit ihren netten weißen Kerlen
seidige Schals auf narbigen Schultern
auf der Suche nach Flügeln

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift
wo zum Teufel sind sie es ist Sonntag
fahren Gangstercarren
Knie baumeln Küchenbänke
Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift
hast du sie gesehen
mit ihren netten weißen Freundinnen
lesen Pablo Neruda
fangen Feuer im Schritt der Vorstadt

Was ist in ihr
Finger Jesus Penis
das alte Testament
sie ist einem Schweißer aus Tonga versprochen
oder einem muskulösen Cook-Island Klippenspringer

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift
hast du sie gesehen an den Stränden
versunken in unschuldigem Olivenöl
drehen ihr Haar zu Strähnen

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift
auf der Bühne dargestellt
lassen deine schwachen Brüder
getragen aus dem Einsamen Horizont

Hast du sie gesehen in die Dämmerung getaucht
die Stunden geschlagen und die Farben
verlaufen wie Mascara
nehmen sich noch einen Lover
sie kann nicht schlafen sie ist wie Donner

Braune Girls mit knallrotem Lippenstift
hast du sie gesehen in der Küche
brechen Muscheln auf schneiden Hühnchen
feuern sich an vor dem einsamen Horizont

ihr dunklen Tausendfüßler sind versteckt
Manu Sinas glitzernde Schnüre

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
sind sie Venen oder blaue Wege
führen zu dunkelrotem Aufbruch.

In Meredith’s poetry, as for example in her poem ‘Basilica’ which I will examine next, allusions to places all around the world can be found – to Auckland, where she grew up, but also Jerusalem, Samoa, Apia and Munich appear. At times, Meredith even names specific streets and places. By referring to these different locations around the world and connecting them in her poem, even though they are scattered on various continents, Meredith creates a sense of her modern, well-travelled and metropolitan self. As Robert Sullivan points out: ‘through her absorption of Berlin’s high and low literary culture, her roots in the Auckland Samoan diaspora, and her familiarity with world Polynesian writing, she brings together an edgy singer’s strength’ (https://courtneymeredith.com/).

Meredith creates relationships and connections between seeming opposites, such as tradition and modernity, between past, present, and future, between Christian religion and the belief of her Samoan ancestors. This becomes apparent in an innovative way in the poem ‘Basilica’, where she writes about religious themes:

I sit in a weatherboard city
a basilica of wondrous beauty
roads have grown from the chest of soldiers
arching to southern lovers
the seabed has no memory of Calvary

In the place of a skull by lemon trees
coloured crescents darken
I take the bones I used to be and wash them
in the Waikato

my grandmother sewed denim
my second father drove a truck

From the mount of olives come promises
they are like gold flakes in the stream
they are like electric fences of the mind
keeping the cows brown

the land is full of boyish bones
some Totara see higher than the Gods of Apia

Mihi be careful with your misery
stars hang above Jerusalem
like coloured glass

on the high plain of Peru
a woman looks like you
   Venancia with brothers in the dust
your body is the light above the dusk

In the second half of the poem we find the line: ‘Some Totara are higher than the Gods of Apia’ (Meredith 38) Apia is the capital of Samoa, so much is clear - but what is the word ‘Gods’ referring to? To actual Gods (and if so, are they Māori or Samoan Gods? Or the Christian God?)? Could it be referring to buildings as modern Gods, of our capitalistic, urban way of life? Or does the author want to sketch a contrast between nature (=Totara) and urban life (=Apia), and past (=where Totara were seen as Gods) and present (=where money, capitalism etc. is valued higher than the ancient Gods)? Even though this is a line that is relatively easy to translate, many questions arise throughout the poem. My translation:

**Basilica**

Ich sitze in einer holzverschalten Stadt
eine Basilica von wundersamer Schönheit
Straßen sind erwachsen aus dem Herzen von Soldaten
strecken sich aus zu südlichen Liebhabern
der Meeresgrund hat keine Erinnerung an Golgotha.

Unter Zitronenbäumen anstelle eines Schädels
verdunkeln farbige Halbmonde
Ich nehme die Knochen die ich war und wasche sie
im Waikato

Meine Großmutter nähte Jeans
Mein zweiter Vater fuhr einen Truck.

Vom Ölberg kommen Versprechen
Sie sind wie Goldstaub in einem Fluss

sie sind wie elektrische Zäune des Geistes
halten die Kühe braun

das Land ist voll Knabenknochen
einige Totara sehen mehr als die Götter von Apia.

Mihi sei vorsichtig mit deinem Kummer
Sterne hängen über Jerusalem
wie kunstvolles Glas

Auf der Hochebene von Peru
sieht eine Frau aus wie du
Venancia mit Brüdern im Staubgestöber
dein Körper ist das Licht im Sternengeflimmer.

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.*’
In the poem ‘Rushing Doll’, the translation situation is, again, a very different one. In this poem, Meredith artfully plays with sounds, rhythm and rhyme, which becomes particularly apparent when she recites it:

I dismiss my ethics because your skin is magic  
I’ve been around the block and the boys are getting thick  
brick is getting older, tyres getting flat,  
babies from the shacks are desert black soldiers

Seeds are dying trees hiding scars on the faces, of  
Pitts without leashes and lippy hippy misses  
supermarket prices are higher than the vices of  
artistic license –  
I stay in the state of misplaced Angel, asphalt  
criminal, high on the subliminal  
and every time I pray, it’s for a piece of ass tryna get away

I’ve wrestled with the salt rocking west coast waves  
the wives by my bedside had husbands in the grave –  
everything we cussed and brought up made me change  
in the end you drink milky tea and watch a lot of TV

My verses have stalkers my poems have daughters  
I’m looking for a daddy for my unborn story

He must know the difference between him and infinity  
be my new chemistry set like DJ decks

I want – less furrowed brows more pregnant cows  
in third world villages, success men like prisoners  
models lying naked in my sleepy nest  
drinking carrot juice to see through the blackness

I want to be an activist but my country is sleeping  
I thought I’d be an actress but my ethnicity’s hungry  
me versus the monkeys on how to beat the junkies  
I’m not a luck advocate but I’m sick of fate  
or – faith in the new world with its old name.

I’m a girl in a girl in a girl in a girl

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.*
I’m a Rushing Doll.
And the dole is a resource like mud is to moles
mafia queens, even, need tunnels to run in
and eyes at me on streets because the weakest looks
away first –
must make the fearless, closest to tears
even in love, we are in despair.

I’m in season, in harvest
the cast moon doesn’t
muck around the meringue peaks beneath

a bit of rock in the monsoon
a bit of star on your teeth
I’m a Rushing Doll.

This poem is so rich that many pages could be written about it but in this essay, I would like
to have a closer look at only one aspect, namely the term ‘Rushing Doll’. Even after taking a
closer look at the term, one might still wonder what it stands for. Reading through the poem, and
encountering the lines

I’m a girl in a girl in a girl in a girl
I’m a Rushing Doll. (Meredith 51)

the image of a Russian Doll comes to mind – a wooden doll, in which, when opened, one finds a
slightly smaller one, and again and again, until there are many dolls in front of you. ‘Rushing’
and ‘Russian’ is doubtlessly a wordplay here, as both words sound so similar. ‘There are many
different layers to a ‘Rushing Doll’ that might not be visible at first glance. It carries within itself
many secrets that are only revealed when we approach it carefully. At the same time, the term
‘Rushing’ is onomatopoeic. When uttering the word aloud, it produces a rather short sound on
the first syllable (‘Ru’) which is followed by swishing sound (‘shhhhh’) that seems to linger
(‘ing---’). Almost like a gush of wind, blowing by, or something that moves very fast and is
already gone while the sound is still audible. It just rushes by.

Considering these observations, what is a rushing doll? A doll or a person with many
different layers to it? Being in a hurry, rushing by? Meredith’s eponymous play seeks to
represent a new generation of Pacific and Māori women actively engaged with their dreams. Is
this what the term ‘Rushing Doll’ refers to? Self-confident, strong and emancipated young
women with a Pacific or Māori background, who break out of their families’ traditions, who
have dreams that they intend to pursue. And if it does, if the term is such an important,
significant one in this context – how could it be translated? The German words for ‘Russian’ and
‘Rushing’ are unfortunately not at all similar in their sound. To further complicate matters, in
Germany, we call the Russian Dolls by their Russian name – Matrjoschka. This would give the
poem a rather different cultural layer. The semantic scope of the word doll is also somewhat
different in German. If used to refer to a young woman, it would have a rather sexist tone to it
which I doubt would reflect Meredith’s use of the word. In the end, I have decided not to
translate the term ‘Rushing Doll’ – I think it’s a beautiful term, and, despite many attempts, I was not able to find a fitting translation that incorporated the sound of the word ‘rushing’, as well as the word play with ‘Russian’ and the meaning it implies. However, reading the rest of the poem, I believe a German reader will be able to imagine what it might mean. This is what translation is about: to try and find a way of recreating sounds, rhythm, rhymes, images and meaning all at the same time. This is the task – and the challenge. My translation tackles it as follows:

Rushing Doll

Ich schieß auf die Moral, deine Haut zieht mich an
Ich bin schon ne Weile da und die Kerle werden krass
Mauern werden älter, Reifen werden platt
Babies aus den Hütten Soldaten wüstenschwarz
Samen vertrocknen Bäume verhüllen ihre Narben auf den Gesichtern, von Pittbulls ohne Leine und frechen hippen Frauchen
Supermarkt-Preise sind höher als die Laster
Pseudo-künstlerischer Ausraster
Ich bleib wie ich bin verlorenener Engel Asphalt
Kriminelle an der Bewusstseinsschwelle
und mit jedem Gebet will ich dass ein Arsch endlich geht
Ich rang mit salzschwellenden Westküstenwellen
die Frauen an meinem Bett hatten Männer an Todesswellen – alles, was wir verfluchten und mit uns nahmen veränderte mich
am Ende trinkst du milchigen Tee beim Fernsehlicht
Meine Verse haben Stalker meine Gedichte Töchter
ich such nach nem Daddy für meine ungeborene Geschichte
Er muss sie kennen die Entfernung zwischen ihm und der Ewigkeit muss mein neues Chemie-Set sein und DJ Deck
Ich will – weniger Mühe, mehr trächtige Kühe
in der 3. Welt, Erfolg, Männer wie Gefangene
Models nackt in meinem schlafenden Nest
trinken Möhrensaft um die Wahrheit zu finden in der Finsternis
Ich würde gern kämpfen doch mein Land pennt zu sehr

Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.
Ich dacht ich würd schauspielen, aber meine Herkunft will mehr
ich gegen die Monkeys wer schlägt die Junkies
Ich glaub nicht mehr an Zufall aber das Schicksal hab ich satt, zu lahm
Glauben in der neuen Welt mit ihrem alten Namen.

Ich bin ein Girl in einem Girl in einem Girl in einem Girl
Ich bin ne Rushing Doll.

Auf Stütze kann man bauen wie Maulwürfe auf Schlamm
Sogar Mafia-Queens brauchen Tunnel zum Rumschleichen
und Augen auf mich auf der Straße denn der Schwächste schaut
zuerst weg –
sei furchtlos am Rand der Tränen
selbst in der Liebe sind wir der Verzweiflung nah.

Ich steh in Blüte, kurz vor der Ernte,
der Schatten des Monds verdeckt nicht mehr
wer ich eigentlich bin

ein Stück Fels im Regen
ein Stück Stern auf deinen Zähnen
Ich bin eine Rushing Doll.

Coming back to the question that was raised at the very beginning of the essay, I have come to
the conclusion that something might well be ‘lost in translation’ as it is not always possible for
the translator to capture and recreate every nuance of the original text. However, the translation
will, invariably, add a new dimension to the original text and highlight

Coming back to the question that was raised at the very beginning of the essay, I have come to
the conclusion that something might well be ‘lost in translation’ as it is not always possible for
the translator to capture and recreate every nuance of the original text. However, the translation
will, invariably, add a new dimension to the original text and highlight aspects that were
invisible or concealed before. It will also ensure that the text can now be read by readers who
speak different languages, and is available to a larger audience – or, as Walter Benjamin
underlines, the translation of a work of literature ‘marks [its] stage of continued life.’¹⁵

Considering the importance of the translator in a postcolonial context, I argue that the
translator can be seen as a central mediator figure, someone who crosses borders – the borders of
languages, of cultures. We make it possible for readers to discover and explore a foreign culture
despite a perceived or in fact existing language barrier. In my case, I have translated poetry by
Māori and Samoan authors from English into German – and thus made them, their work, their
thoughts and ideas accessible for a German reading audience who have an interest in Māori and
indigenous poetry. However, my choices and my understanding of being a translator in a
postcolonial context also bring a political implication with them. Much in the same way that
Meredith or Robert Sullivan¹⁶ make the choice of leaving words from their indigenous language
untranslated and make this a political act, I, too, seek to honour and to re-create this in my

¹⁵ Benjamin 254.
¹⁶ A poet whose poetry collection Star Waka I translated in 2012 and which was the first poetry collection by a
Māori author to be translated in its entirety into German.
translation. Translating marginalised poetry in a postcolonial context, finding – and not giving – a voice for marginalised people, is a political act.

Lotta Schneidemesser’s doctoral research focuses on the moment of homecoming and looking into the broader issues that concern home, homecoming and return migration in Māori and Pacific Literature. She was awarded a scholarship by the Heinrich-Böll foundation for the duration of her PhD. In 2012, she translated the poetry collection *Star Waka* by Māori poet Robert Sullivan into German, which was the first poetry collection by a Māori author that has ever been translated into German.

**Glossary**

Aitu: ghost, spirit, demon (Samoan)
Apia: capital of Western Samoa
KRoad: short for ‘Karangahape Road,’ inner Auckland alternative-cultural focal point
Manu Samoa: warrior display, performed by Manu Samoa, the Samoan national rugby team
Manu Sina: iconic bird of Samoa; white seagull
Mihi: A Māori greeting or formal welcome (as in ‘mihi w-hahatan’). Also a woman’s name
Totara: a tall species of native New Zealand tree
Waikato: the North Island's largest river, south of Auckland
Works Cited


Lotta Schneidemesser. ‘Finding a ‘German’ Voice for Courtney Sina Meredith’s *Brown Girls in Bright Red Lipstick*.’


Interview with Kayo Chingonyi, Poet and Creative Facilitator

Lioba Schreyer

I first contacted Kayo Chingonyi, because I was interested in his work as a poet. While planning the workshop “Voices from the Margins,” I was looking for a writer to perform as a part of the cultural event when I stumbled across his poem “Legerdemain” (Campaign in Poetry, The Emma Press, 2015). But I soon learnt that Chingonyi is more than a poet.

In his 2011 profile for Poetry International Web, Alan Ward calls Chingonyi a “creative facilitator”. A title well earned, as a look into his biography and my conversation with him reveal. Born in Zambia in 1987, Kayo Chingonyi moved to the UK in 1993. In addition to writing and performing poetry, he raps and teaches creative writing workshops at universities, schools and youth centres. He has collaborated with the dancer Sean Graham, and with the composer Fred Thomas, and curated events for the Institute of Contemporary Arts as well as London’s Africa Centre, to mention but a few of his projects. The London-based poet holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Sheffield and an MA in Creative Writing from Royal Holloway, University of London.

Kayo Chingonyi has completed residencies with Kingston University, Cove Park and others. He won the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize in 2012 and was shortlisted for the Brunel University African Poetry Prize in 2013. His first pamphlet, Some Bright Elegance (Salt, 2012) is subject of this interview. Following Kayo’s suggestion, we discussed the elegies “Kenta”, “Alternate Take” and “A Proud Blemish”. He has published a second pamphlet, The Colour of James Brown’s Scream (Akashic, 2016), and his first full-length collection, Kumukanda (Chatto & Windus, 2017).

Kayo Chingonyi attended the workshop “Voices from the Margins,” held at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, 23 and 24 September 2016, where this interview was conducted. The interview was edited and expanded in consultation with Kayo Chingonyi between January and March 2017.

**Lioba Schreyer:** Our project is called “Voice from the Margins.” Where do you fit in there?

**Kayo Chingonyi:** I think because I came to the English language as an outsider and I still exist within that space, there is a sense in which my voice could be seen as marginal, outside of the norm, somehow. And so, I feel the need, in the writing that I do, to affirm my sense of belonging to the centre rather than the margins, because English is a language I have lived with for a long time. It is the language I think in. I can express myself well in English. So, the notion of voices from the margins makes me think about how canons are made, and also what we think of as the ‘unmediated, general, objective’ voice.

I am also interested in trying to rupture our notion of the unmediated voice. A title like “Voices from the Margins” is immediately provocative to me, and interesting. And since it is a workshop, it is also an opportunity to interrogate the title. It felt like something I would be interested in.

**LS:** I asked the previous question at the reading last night, when we first met. Now that you have participated in the workshop, did your view on the title change?

---


**KC:** I have recently read a book of essays called *The Good Immigrant*, edited by Nikesh Shukla. He collected a body of essays by different writers who identify as immigrants to the UK. It expanded my notion of what being marginalised is, because my notion of that comes from being black within the context of Britishness, but also African within the context of blackness. A lot of the kind of contemporary iconography of blackness is African American and not African per se. And even ‘African’ you could rupture into smaller subdivisions.

Thinking about the margins is to think about subjectivity, the very specific things which cannot be generalised. And those are maybe the important things to maintain in writing, because they are the things we quite often keep to ourselves; the things that we do not think are worthy of literature. So, yes, in the project of destabilising what the centre is, we need to include those voices that are deemed marginal. So, it was nice to participate and to think about the Zimbabwean poetry scene and to think about Pacific and Samoan and Hawai’ian poetics in the context of those discussions. It broadened my thinking.

**LS:** One of the topics that was prominent was the difference between oral and written literature. You present your work as both, written texts as well as live performances and recordings. The genre, of course, lends itself to both. Does this double-presentation influence your writing process?

**KC:** To my best understanding, poetry, in the written tradition, is always engaged with the oral tradition in literature. As a poet, you are interested in the meaning of a word, but also its sound and the meanings that are enacted by that sound; you are interested in pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic meanings, and the feeling that a sound can embody and enact in a listener.

To me, poetry is an opportunity to fix that gulf, that notion of there being a split between the oral and the written traditions in my own understanding, and to bring those two sides of literary practice together. I am always interested in giving performances, but also in consolidating that in print.

But I am not interested in a final version of a text being the authoritative text. I am interested in the little changes and shifts that can happen through performing a particular piece of work a number of times over a number of years; a word might change or shift or a reference might become outdated and need to be changed or other shifts might happen based on how the work is performed. Being somebody who performs and publishes is something that is nourishing to my writing.

It has always been at the heart of what I think of as poetry writing, as opposed to writing short stories or writing novels. Authors read extracts from works of fiction, but it is not quite the same culture of orality, because you can take a single poem, memorise it and you have some ownership over it for the rest of your life, whereas it is much more difficult to memorise an entire work of fiction, though you can try, I suppose.

**LS:** At last night’s reading, you mentioned the double-spheres of poetry as a public and a private genre. I am asking this, because I think that is what makes poetry so compelling. You mentioned racism to be a topic that you focussed on for a while; then you neglected it but returned to it later. And while it is possible to inform yourself about racism in other ways, reading essays and watching the news, poetry adds a private sphere to the issue.

Now, I assume that the private sphere I find as a reader possibly comes from private experiences of the poet. How do you negotiate the spheres in your writing? Is this something you
consider? Do you just write straight from the heart, or does the fact that you will publish it and, in a sense, expose yourself influence your writing process?

**KC:** I would challenge this idea of “from the heart” in relation to the work that I publish, because the process of writing takes me away from the original impulse which made me write one word or a phrase that I then followed into the process of writing that poem. So, early on I am not necessarily sure where a poem is going to go and so I cannot really think of it as an expression from the heart as such, but I am trying to follow a bodily connection as well as a cerebral connection in the writing. What is personal in my work is that attempt to be present, as present as I can be, as somebody who is by nature quite reserved in other spheres of life.

I do not really have to negotiate the public and private in my writing in the sense of feeling that I cannot publish a certain thing because it is too personal, because I do not really write in that style very often. But even when I write something that has happened in my life, I am always engaged in some process of transformation, so that it is not just what happened, but it is maybe involved in some musical or rhythmical process, which then takes it out of the experience alone into something else.

I am interested in the genres of memoir and biography, those truth-telling mediums, whereby it is not necessarily about a musical connection, it is more about how the story moves somebody. Is this story authentic? How does this story make me feel? While I am also interested in a feeling when I write a poem, what is equally important are the words, specifically their shape; how they make me feel, and how they make others feel through publication and performance.

**LS:** Can you tell us more about your prose?

**KC:** I write prose criticism. I have been writing essays lately in which I have been trying to marry a literary critical voice with a more personal voice which navigates some of the experiences I’ve been through. That is something I am increasingly interested in and it is an area of literary criticism that is very compelling to me in terms of my reading. I do love to read straight criticism and theory. But at the same time, I am also interested in those presentations of particular subjectivities which you can find in a book of personal essays. So, while I am interested in prose, it is not really prose fiction too often. It is not that I am not interested, but it takes me such a long time to get into a story that it’s more of a long-term endeavour; whereas poems, they take a long time as well, but I can be working on a number of them at the same time.

**LS:** How did you start writing in the first place?

**KC:** I cannot really remember a time when I was not writing, but I began as a voracious reader. At primary school, I would borrow books from the school library, five or six at a time, take them home, read all of them, bring them back, read some more. I always had books with me. And I was an only child, so it was really just books that occupied my time up until I started to buy music and albums. For a long time, it was all about books and TV. And to me, TV has always been a literary form in some way. I have always been interested in the writing of it, as well as its value as entertainment. I have always been conscious that somebody wrote this; I even used to want to be a cartoonist. And so I have always been interested in authorship.

**LS:** Sounds like you just really grew into it. Why did you not end up being a cartoonist? Or is that still something that you might work on?
**KC:** It is something that I would love to do, but I am really interested in following what comes naturally to me. Writing and using language has always been something that I found easy. Not that it did not take work, but there was a fluency which I did not have with drawing. Drawing is different in that some people have that fluency, but most people must work at it a lot and go into the detail a lot. And when I go into the detail when I am drawing, I find it really frustrating. Whereas when I go into detail and have to work hard when I am writing, it never feels difficult, even though it might be taxing.

**LS:** I would like to talk about a few of your poems from *Some Bright Elegance*. Let us begin with “Kenta”.

**KC:** A few years ago, I studied with a poet and lecturer called Anthony Joseph, who is also a musician, and he is really interested in surrealism and he showed us a poem called “Free Union” by André Breton, in which the poet makes a number of associative descriptions of his wife. And he challenged us to make a similar imagistic portrait of somebody and I decided to make a portrait of my little brother, who I do not really remember. He was born when I was two years old and he only lived a few months. There are a few pictures that we have and that is it. This was a feeling of loss while not being able to name specifically that loss, because I do not remember a person as such; I remember a set of things that I have been told and I remember maybe a set of disconnected fragments, so this way of working was very conducive to writing about Kenta, because it is fragmentary by nature.

I also became interested in poems which are not paraphrasable but exist as affective statements. Some forms of writing are easily critiqued in that you can say plenty about them, you can close read them easily and get to the bottom of the poem. I wanted to make poems that did not necessarily have a bottom that you can get to. And this is an example of that.

**LS:** What is also interesting is that “Kenta” is printed in a landscape-format and line endings looks less conscious, apart from the anaphora. You use backslashes as well. Can you tell me something about that? Why did you decide to write it in this format?

**KC:** At that point, I was interested in prose poems. And I think the conventional line in mainstream British poetry, like the pentameter, has become over-used. So, I was just trying to see what else I could do.

**LS:** Let’s move on to “Alternate Take”. What can you tell us about this poem?

**KC:** The notion of an alternate take is just a borrowing from the musical recording whereby jazz musicians would make different versions. I am just thinking about how you can narrate a particular event in your life in lots of different ways.

**LS:** In both poems, you use the word *mwaice wandi*. What does it mean?

**KC:** It is a way of referring to your younger sibling. “Kenta” is dedicated to my brother; “Alternate Take” is addressed to him but dedicated to my father and the last elegy, “A Proud Blemish,” is for my mother.

**LS:** Can you tell us more about the writing of “Alternate Take”? There seems to be a temporal distance between the subject, the father’s passing, and the speaker, as if it is a recollection later in the life of the speaker. What prompted you to write the elegies at the time?
KC: The distance comes from being unable to write the poem any sooner through reasons of failed technique and also the fact that such a poem inhabits one of the most painful moments of my life. That was a poem I began in my late teens and finished just before *Some Bright Elegance* came out. There is a sense in which such a poem can’t be satisfactorily completed because it is trying to do what some elegies do and stop time in a particular moment so that those lost can be remembered. Nick Mount has an excellent lecture on the work of Sylvia Plath which is available online. In that lecture he talks about how the lyric poem is an attempt to stop time.

LS: Would you like to talk about the one for your mother, “A Proud Blemish”?
KC: I moved to the UK when I was six. I had been living with my dad in Zambia and my mum was studying in the UK. I was six when my dad passed, and so I came to live with her. And then my mum passed when I was thirteen. This is a poem exploring that year in my life: When I was thirteen years old, in the year 2000; the music I was listening to, the milieu that I was in. It is a lament of the way that we are as children; that we do not appreciate what our parents have sacrificed for us. I think that is one of the key issues of childhood. There is a carefree aspect to it. Or there can be, anyway. These are all things I came to appreciate later, and the poem is really written out of that appreciation.

LS: Thank you for sharing this. You mention your mother tongue in “A Proud Blemish.” Which language is that? And what is your relationship to it?
KC: Bemba is the language I spoke first though I would be considered Luvale in Zambia because of my name and my father’s heritage. I do not speak either language though I can sometimes follow simple exchanges in Bemba. Part of the problem is that I have now become so fluent in English I hate giving up that fluency when speaking a language, I don’t know as well. I have resolved to try, however.

LS: Last night, one of the questions from the audience was: ‘Where is home?’
KC: I am always inclined to answer the same question differently when it is put to me in a different context. I have been thinking about the spaces where I can feel at home and those spaces have to include some relationship to music. I feel at home in places where music is at the centre of life, whether that be places with a strong culture of clubbing and night life or just places where social dance and song is a part of the culture.

I’d like to spend some time in Latin America. I have only been to Mexico, but it is a place that I felt, not necessarily that I belonged, but that my presence there was not cause for suspicion as such. It was cause for interest and led to me having conversations with people, whereas some of the places that I have been, there is an inherent suspicion, especially in the United States. I just went to the States for the first time recently for an extended period of time and the level of suspicion in certain places just felt odd to me.

I feel at home in places that have some relationship to orality and music, and also in places where my presence might be interesting to somebody or where that might lead to a conversation.

LS: Did that come as surprise to you, the suspicion you faced when you went to the US?
KC: In the States there is that sense of separation which I had not quite experienced in that way. There is just the sense that they do not want people to visit; they want to make it as hard as possible. And those people who do visit, they do not look upon them in a friendly light. They work out whether that person is a threat first and then they decide whether they want to be
friendly or not. Whereas in some places that I have been to there was friendliness immediately. And even if there is suspicion there, that is done in a way that is quite different.

**LS:** Where in the US were you?
**KC:** I went to LA and I went to New York. I felt this more in NYC than I did in LA. In LA I felt at home. But, NYC was very strange to me.

**LS:** That surprises me, because NYC, I would say, is so multicultural.
**KC:** It is, but I guess because of its bigness it has lots of pockets of communities which do not necessarily mix. Even though there might be certain mixtures, there are still prominent, big communities which never mix at all, which was strange to me.

**LS:** Is that different in London, where you live?
**KC:** I think so, because I live in a part of London which has a large Hasidic-Jewish population and there is a Muslim population next to that and then several different religious denominations from Christianity but also just people from all around the word. And it is a very middle class area. At the same time, there isn’t quite the same sense of suspicion.

For example, I can wander into a neighbourhood which is mostly Hasidic-Jewish and my presence there might be a little bit weird in so far as there aren’t so many people who aren’t from that community. But at the same time there is just an acceptance that being in London encompasses mixing with lots of different people and going to shops that sell all manner of different types of food and so forth. Whereas, when I was in NYC, there was a feeling of separation, a strong feeling of separation, particularly in Brooklyn where I was staying.

**LS:** I’d also like to talk about your forthcoming collection of poetry, *Kumukanda.* You mentioned working with your editor in that context yesterday, and I would like to talk about this cooperation and the editorial process. How does preparing this collection differ from your previous experience, when, for example, feedback would come from a live audience in a less refined way?

**KC:** I have never really gotten feedback from a live audience in a pointed, meaningful way. It is nice that people seem to appreciate the work when I give readings, but that does not compare to the critical feedback given in an editorial process or workshop. To improve my poems, I usually meet with friends, share work and talk about it that way.

My second pamphlet, *The Colour of James Brown’s Scream,* had a quite stringent and thorough editorial process whereby there was editorial commentary. The first pamphlet, *Some Bright Elegance,* did not have that. The poems had already gone through certain editorial processes, because I had undertaken a Master’s degree in creative writing, which involved a creative writing workshop. Additionally, I was part of another workshop group.

The criticism I receive from readings is just my assumption of what the audience is feeling in a moment. Or if I read something and it doesn’t come across, that is a clear way of understanding that I might need to change something. Or if someone comes up to me afterwards and asks me a question about a particular thing, then I might need to clarify. Those are the kinds of critique that I get from the live setting.

But I have not had an editorial experience quite like the one for *Kumukanda,* because for this one there is a dedicated editor and it is a much more refined process in that respect.
LS: Are you enjoying it?
KC: Yes, so far, it has been good. I think this is a publisher who understands what I am trying to do, so that is helpful. You need an editor who is on your side, ultimately, but also challenges you about particular things, whereas sometimes editors can be not on your side at all, so it feels antagonistic.

LS: You are involved in so many other projects. Before coming to Essen, you went to Vienna for The British Council’s *Shakespeare Walking Cities*; what other projects are you currently involved in?
KC: I have been working with Stirling University for a little while on a project that arose out of the *Out of Bounds* anthology, which came out with Bloodaxe Books in 2012. The anthology is a collection of black, Asian, and minority ethnic poets writing from different spaces in the UK, and affirming their belonging to those places through their writing or through the fact that they set their poems in those places. It is a project in which we host events in different cities in the UK which explore this theme of place and poetry, belonging, language and any related ideas. So, I have been working on that and will continue to do so until November 2016.

I have been doing some writing for classical music as well. My words have been set to music by a composer named Fred Thomas. That has been exciting. Additionally, I am engaged in an ongoing collaboration with a dancer called Sean Graham and I am hoping that we are going to collaborate again on a more long-form work which brings together our disciplines.

LS: How does that work, the work with a dancer?
KC: Sean is a writer as well, so we begin by, if not necessarily close-reading the work, then by discussing it in a lot of depth for several hours. And then we go into the dance studio and Sean improvises a little or he tries out some pre-defined choreography or we just talk through some things. And so far, the process has always involved myself and Sean as performers, so it is a little bit more hybrid than if Sean were dancing and I were reading and that was it. We are trying to work in that mode as much as we can.

LS: Can you elaborate on your collaboration with the composer as well?
KC: I don’t read music so working with a classical composer mostly involved trying to find a common language. I tried in the writing to think more about the sounds of the words I was using than I ordinarily do. Fred then took his cue from the writing I had done and came up with some compositions. The words and music both responded to a Leoš Janáček string quartet which in turn was a response to Leo Tolstoy’s novella, The Kreutzer Sonata. The process made me want to work again with a composer.
References and Further Reading


Kenta

After Breton

Kid brother, with the chicken bone knuckles/uranium skin/eyes of white glass/face of cold steel/feet of small bear/teeth of smashed crockery/kiss of Ndola mist/voice of wisps/head of clumps and patches/belly of warm dough/odour of burning/fingers of crackled peat/chest of cypress wood/thoughts of mango of guava of cassava/smile of snapped elastic/face of chalk/face of cracked wafer/name of blown eardrum/steps of falling ash/breath of jet/mwaice wandi, second born, with a heart of bad arithmetic.

Kayo Chingonyi

Originally published in Some Bright Elegance (Salt, 2012)
Alternate Take

When they laid our father out, mwaice wandi,
I want to say, I’m meant to say, soft light
played the skin of his spent face and the sobs
were, of course, a jangling kind of song.

If I could take you where the sandy earth
meets his final stone, tiled and off-white,
we might have learned to worship better gods.
He was known, in the shebeens, as long John.

At the wake relatives tried variations
on the words of the day: I am sorry
for your grieving/your trouble/your loss.
I’ve been weighing these apologies for years

carried on like disused stations.
I think of his walk becoming your quarry,
his knack for beguiling women, your cross.
It’s enough to bring me here, past tears

to where his face simplifies to a picture:
the shrine in Nagoya, him stood, Sequoia
among lesser trees, looking good in denim;
eye inch the charismatic spectre.

In his memory my voice bears his tincture—
saxophone played low slash boy raised on soya
porridge, chloroquine, a promise of heaven.
There are days I think I’m only a vector

carrying him slowly to my own graveyard
and, standing at the lectern, rather than my son,
will be another copy: the same sharp
edge to the chin, that basso profundo hum.
Kid brother, we breathers have made an art
of negation, see how a buckled drum
is made from a man’s beating heart
and a fixed gaze is a loaded weapon.

Kayo Chingonyi

Originally published in *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012)
A Proud Blemish

The year I graduate from size eights, 
learn to walk in the grown man’s shoes 
contradicting the diminutive frame 
I parade across the Arndale estate:

2step is an airborne sickness, infecting 
every discerning cassette deck, 
after-hours wine bar, joy rider’s car. 
Most weekends I try to fool a woman 
accustomed to the lies of men, sneak home 
an hour shy of her footfall in the hallway, 
to rehearse my lines: I was home … I just … didn’t hear the phone, the beep 
of the answering machine, her repeating 
my name till it’s a prayer, voice two parts ire, one despair, that her days are riven between shift patterns and her only son.

By the time I graduate size nines, understand Caesarean, when she answers my question: 
did it hurt? Shows me the dark groove hidden under her work shirt, a proud blemish in skin 
rippled with ridges from weight loss, she knows It’s not stress. Still we sit, lumps in throats, wait on tests. They don’t know what’s wrong she says, next day she’s back to underground tunnels, thousands riding the same choppy waves. 
Soon she’s too weak to walk or wash herself. 
The bones of her skull vitiate a face that once stunned grown men into mumbling stupors.

Kayo Chingonyi. ‘Kenta.’
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018. 
On a grey ward, two months into size elevens,
she speaks in my mother tongue, begs me trace
the steps of its music, but the discord of two
languages keeps me from the truth I won’t hear.

She’s dying but I won’t call her dead, can’t let her
become: a body, a stone, an empty hospital bed.

Kayo Chingonyi

Originally published in *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012)
interior w/ceiling fan

i wish that we could lie here
for the rest of our lives
the blades of the fan above us
whirling like a tanguera’s skirt
everything outside this room
a distant country

let me be this unguarded always
speaking without need of words
because breath is the oldest language
any of us know

*Kayo Chingonyi*

2017