

Live Writing:
A Psychophysical Approach
to the Analysis of Black British Poetry in
Performance

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Abstract

This study redresses the scarcity of critical engagement with poetry in performance. My case studies are ‘black British poets’. I argue that the poet’s use of voice, gesture, presence, breath, prosody, improvisation, introductions, commentary and asides can be analysed as part of *live writing*. I demonstrate that the analysis of poetry in performance requires multiple methodologies and analytical approaches. I provide a correction to existing models and approaches to analysing poetry in performance by selecting methodology in response to the poet’s work and the contexts and heritages that inform their practice. I use ‘live writing’ as a lens that can be applied to all poetry performances, from the poet who quietly reads to the poet who recites whilst dancing. This study reveals that performing poetry is a psychophysical act that engages the poet’s entire (a)liveness.

The first contextualising chapters consider the place of performance within British poetry as a whole, and how labels such as ‘spoken word’ and ‘fixed-identity’ can be used to exclude. ‘Live writing’ is discussed in relation to poststructuralism, the avant-garde and black British poetry. Chapter two, “Ways of Listening” demonstrates how a legacy of analysis founded on Saussure’s differentiation between *langue* and *parole* has impacted literary criticism and ways of listening, revealing that even recent analyses of poetry in performance re-prioritise the page. Finally, in chapter three, the potential meanings and origins of ‘British spoken word voice’ are considered and its attributes analysed using pitch-tracking software.

Drawing on methodology from literary criticism, performance studies, sociolinguistics and musicology, the second half of this study is dedicated to analyses of live writing by Salena Godden, David J and Lemn Sissay. I analyse their work via the aesthetics and histories of hip hop, oral literature, Brechtian theatre, and Geneva Smitherman’s discussion of black semantics, specifically ‘talk-singing’ and ‘Signifyin’. Godden and David J are influential British poets whose work has not previously been analysed within or outside of academia. Lemn Sissay has been more widely discussed; I provide a unique contribution by analysing his use of gesture and voice, asides and commentary (or ‘performed palimpsests’) in relation to Bertolt Brecht’s writings on defamiliarisation. The study concludes with a discussion of Sissay’s *The Report* that refocuses my use of the phrase ‘live writing’.

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Introduction

“Thought is made in the mouth” Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos*, 1920

As the poet and scholar Kofi Anyidoho wrote in 1992 we (still!) ‘need to revise our understanding of the concept of “publication” to include the act of performing poetry in public’ (262). The etymological root of the word ‘publish’ is the Latin *publicare*, ‘to make public’. Critics and scholars typically only analyse poems that have been made public on the page. Most poets make their work public both on the page and in performance. Ignoring performance means ignoring key aspects of the ways in which poets *write*. Very few British poets do not publish on the page at all, however, a growing number have successful careers before they publish a collection. Drawing on performance studies, literary criticism, musicology and linguistics, this study explores the ways in which poets write in performance as well as on the page, and how the use of the voice and body contribute to meanings as part of the poet’s ‘live writing’.

I use the term ‘live writing’ as a lens through which to view poetry in performance. Of course, all writing is ‘live’ in the sense that the writer is *alive* as they write it. My use of ‘live writing’ focuses on poetry that is performed by the writer, with a ‘live’ audience. Analysing performances based on audiovisual versions complicates this notion of ‘liveness’, but enables close listening and analysis that is not otherwise possible. The phrase ‘live writing’ encourages us to see *writing* as integral to performance, and all elements of performance as strands with which the poet writes, live. ‘Live writing’ prevents the separation between ‘writing’ and (‘live’) performance that is responsible for so little critical engagement with poetry in performance. The present continuous of ‘writing’ helps us view the poetry performance as always in the process of being written. My use of ‘live writing’ does not privilege a notion of ‘writing’ when analysing performance, but demonstrates that a speech/writing binary is not an opposition experienced by poets who perform. ‘Live writing’ is not a label that distinguishes groups of poets from each other, but a lens that might be applied to all kinds of poetry performances, from the poet who quietly reads their poem from the pages of a book to the poet who recites whilst dancing.

By analysing the performances of David J, Salena Godden and Lemn Sissay I reveal

how the poet can 'write live' in performance. All perform their work today, have influenced many other poets, and are particularly known as performers. Analyses of each poet's work, from Salena Godden's talk-singing and jazz influenced improvisation, to David J's hip hop influenced freestyling and repertoire of vocal techniques, to Lemn Sissay's use of gesture and prolonged introductions and interruptions that defamiliarise the act of performing poetry, build a picture of the ways in which poets *write live*. All three demonstrate the premise put forward by the American poet and scholar Charles Bernstein in his introduction to *Close Listening*: 'The poem, viewed in terms of its multiple performances, or mutual intertranslatability, has a fundamentally plural existence' (9). This principle underlies my study, in which I treat a performance of a poem as one version, with no more or less validity than any other performance, manifestation, or version existing in print.

This study demonstrates there is no one way of analysing poetry in performance, no single analytical 'toolkit' that can be applied to all poems. Poets use different techniques in their writing and performances, explore different material, write within different contexts and heritages, and therefore an analysis of their live writing requires responsive methodologies. Although it is possible to notate a poem incorrectly, there is usually no 'right' way of analysing and interpreting meanings. As Kamau Brathwaite says in 'History of the voice', 'the noise that it makes is part of its meaning' (271); however, that meaning can differ depending on who is listening. The exciting thing is that noise *means*. Throughout this study I try to acknowledge the subjectivity of my interpretations by referring to 'meanings' in the plural and the 'meaning potential' of a poem. I have borrowed this notion of plural meaning potential from Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, who, in their study on multimodal discourse write that 'multimodal texts' make meaning 'in multiple articulations' (4).

I have seen all the poets whose performances I analyse in this study perform on numerous occasions. These experiences feed into my discussions of their work; however, because the analysis of poetry in performance requires watching and listening to a performance multiple times I have restricted my analyses to poems that are available to watch online. I sometimes use notation to draw attention to specific observations, but my analyses are always of the performances and not my transcriptions, and so the reader of this thesis needs to view the videos alongside these chapters. The biggest challenge of this project is *listening*. It is possible to review but not to analyse a

performance after only one viewing. Audio and audiovisual recordings provide the means for us to analyse poetry performances and perform ‘close listenings’, the equivalent to a ‘close reading’ of a poem from the page.

I suggest that the analysis of poetry in performance consists of three elements: listening, notating or describing, and analysing. The three elements are interconnected rather than consecutive. Even when a poem has been notated, the analyser needs to keep listening to it and analyse the performance and not the notation. It is impossible to transcribe every aspect of a performance; when selecting appropriate forms of notation the listener makes decisions about which aspects of the performance they view as important. In my chapter “British Spoken Word Voice” I use the pitch analysis programme ‘Drift’ to analyse trends in intonation. Drift tracks the frequency of the voice and is a useful tool to use when analysing a number of performances in order to observe general trends. Poems that are in regular time signatures can be notated using musical notation, or simply by identifying the beat (as in my chapter on Salena Godden); other poems may not need notating at all, but just describing. When discussing the performances of David J I found that we do not have existing terms to describe his extensive range of vocal techniques; in this case even the act of description involves analysis (the chapter includes an annotated video). The coining of new terminology involves questioning the possible heritages of the techniques and identifying parallels with other artforms.

“Titles, Labels & Names” continues to unpack the terms within the thesis title and in so doing discusses the contexts and histories of today’s British poetry ‘scene’ and the existing literature. It explores the complexities contained in the coupling of ‘performance’ with ‘black’ poets, the weight attached to labels such as ‘performance poet’ and ‘spoken word’, and in contrast, the creative acts of self-naming that many poets engage in. It illustrates ‘live writing’ through a discussion of how Malika Booker wrote ‘My Mother’s Blues’ live with her audience. The final section considers the ways in which the term ‘live writing’ has been used within avant-garde discourse, how the poet’s presence can be theorised, absented and politicised, and how these debates intersect with discussions of performance and race.

“Ways of Listening” considers the ways in which we listen to poetry in performance, ways of embracing our subjectivity, different approaches to notation and what notation can reveal about how we listen. It reveals that from established literary critics to

linguists researching in the field of ‘sound symbolism’, there is a lack of listening in academia that is evident when performance is discussed without reference to actual instances of performance, voice and sound symbolism is discussed without reference to the unique utterance, and performed poetry is analysed using page-based metric models. I demonstrate that when academics do occasionally analyse specific examples of poetry performances the legacy of an approach modelled on white Western poetry is evident, with established critics such as Derek Attridge and Jonathan Culler analysing rap based on their incorrect notation of it rather than a close listening to the performance. This approach re-prioritises the page, erasing the syncopation and ‘flow’ of the artist and in the process also erasing, or *whitening*, the cultural and historical background to the form. By focusing on a performance of ‘Imagine if you had to lick it!’ by Salena Godden, I explore how close listening can uncover insights into the ways in which the poet’s use of voice reveals and changes the potential meanings of sound in ways only apparent through listening to the unique performance.

“British Spoken Word Voice” analyses trends in delivery found within British ‘spoken word’. It identifies the key features of this kind of ‘Poet Voice’ through interviews and analysis, using the pitch analysis programme ‘Drift’ to identify trends in intonation. I consider possible roots of the features of ‘spoken word voice’ and explore how a distinctive prosody impacts meaning potential. I question why it is so common for poets to use a recognisable kind of ‘Poet Voice’ and consider how the distinctive mode of intonation heard in British ‘spoken word’ might contribute to the wish of some poets and critics to view spoken word as a genre in its own right.

“Salena Godden: Talk-singing, the Poet as Musician” discusses the work of Salena Godden, her use of improvisation and of ‘talk-singing’. It explores the ways in which Godden integrates song quotations into her performances and how the choice to sing can be viewed through the lens of live writing and in reference to the African American cultural practice of ‘Signifyin’ (Gates). The chapter focuses on an analysis of ‘Limp Expectations’, a poem spoken/sung with a band at ‘Tongue Fu’ in London, and explores how Godden writes the poem live, using the page as a score as she riffs and inserts repetitions to fit the musical form. It identifies ways in which Godden’s use of body and voice to Signify on performance modes adds strands of meaning potential to her poem.

“David J’s Vocal Pugilism” builds on the discussion of improvisation by considering

David J's approach to freestyling, a mode of 'live writing' described by David J as 'using the eye like a pen' (interview). It reveals how the hip hop battle with its sparring 'pugilist' metaphors has shaped his vocal techniques and approach to writing in performance. The variety of David J's vocal techniques and prosody in performance (what Geneva Smitherman describes as 'tonal semantics') provides a contrast to the distinctive patterns discussed in "British Spoken Word Voice". I include a taxonomy of terms with which to describe his vocal effects, and apply them to an analysis of his performance 'This is What We Do'.

The final chapter, "Lemn Sissay: Defamiliarising the Poetry Performance" reveals how Sissay's use of body, voice and introductory passages and asides are part of his live writing. I consider Lemn Sissay's performances in relation to Bertolt Brecht's concept of defamiliarisation, analysing how Sissay uses his body and voice to 'make strange' his poetry. I suggest his introductions, asides and commentary can be seen as 'performed palimpsests' that decontextualise and defamiliarise the poetry performance and himself as 'poet'. The chapter demonstrates that far from the 'naïve identity politicking' that black British poets are often accused of (Huk 38)¹, Sissay's performances destabilise his own presence, authority and context in ways that can be considered in relation to the poststructural mistrust of authorial presence explored in chapter one. It includes analysis of a number of Sissay's performances, and concludes with a discussion of *The Report*, a one off event staged at the Royal Court. This final chapter re-focuses my use of the phrase 'live writing', raising the question of whether 'live writing' can be a way of re-writing one's own life on stage.

As part of this project I conducted interviews with poets for a new archive at the British Library. It is a resource that I draw on in this thesis and is available for other researchers. The original Collaborative Doctoral Award proposal written by The British Library and Stirling University (Dr. Gemma Robinson), specified the overall research area, 'black British Poetry in Performance', and that the methodology of the project should emphasise 'the importance of visual and sound documentation of performances and interviews'. The proposal was for a project that 'could only be conducted through a collaborative and interdisciplinary framework that moves beyond text-based studies' and that would 'record and articulate how poetry works in performance, and assess the

¹ Romana Huk does not accuse poets of 'naïve identity politicking' herself but points out this is an assumption that might be made about black British poets of colour by the white British avant-garde (38).

usefulness of descriptors such as “black British” within performance poetry contexts’. The interviews will sit within the British Library’s ‘Sounds’ archive, complementing existing holdings such as ‘Conference on the Power of Caribbean Poetry – word and sound’, the documentation of the 2012 Cambridge conference on Caribbean poetry. It connects to their holdings of audio-recorded poetry performances such as ‘Poet in the City’ and their interview project with Linton Kwesi Johnson (which took place over the same time period I was working with them and is not yet publically available). The British Library audiovisual recording of Lemn Sissay’s *Something Dark* (at Battersea Arts Centre) as part of their archive of BAC performances (since 2005) provided useful reference points for my writings on Sissay. I spent time listening to records of Mikey Smith in the British Library listening rooms, before realising this material is now available on Youtube! Due to the availability of poetry performances and recordings on Youtube it felt important to provide a contribution to the archives that is not available in other online forums. The British Library archive ‘Between Two Worlds: Poetry and Translation’ records poets discussing their experiences of speaking, writing, or experiencing more than one language. The archival approach of the British Library interviews consists of minimal intervention and questioning from the interviewer and a focus on the personal life of the poet. There are few follow up questions or any challenging questions which means that the interviewees do not go into depth about their writing. My interviews are more like discussions and I ask questions aiming to probe deeper into the ways in which the poets approach their practices. My research interests as well as my wish to draw out the interests and obsessions of the poets themselves informed my questions. A particular focus on the craft of performance runs through the interviews. They are a unique record of poets discussing this craft in depth. Many of the subjects covered in the interviews are not part of this thesis, and many of the interviewees have so far been neglected by academia. The interviews include discussions on British poetry and the use of descriptors such as ‘black British’, ‘performance poetry’ and ‘spoken word’. The poets discuss the ways in which labels and categories can be used to exclude and conversely how self-naming can be a creative act. The interviews include discussions of the use of the body and the voice in performance, intonation and types of ‘Poet Voice’, writing methods and how writing is often done out loud, the different ways in which poets develop their craft, collaboration and working as a poet within theatre and music. Each interview includes the recording of several poems and reflections on poems, projects and performances. I realised early on that these recordings of poems are important parts of the interviews, but not the best

recordings for me to analyse; an intimate one to one reading sitting down in a sound studio is entirely different to a performance with an audience.

In order to focus my research I interpreted the library's title of 'black British' to mean poets of African and Caribbean heritage who were born in the UK or currently live here. The archive could be expanded in the future to include poets of colour more widely. My selection of interviewees was in part guided by The British Library, which did not want me to interview poets who already featured in their archives (I made some exceptions). My selections were also impacted by my connection to the poets. Poets whom I know personally were more likely to respond to my request and give up their (unpaid) time for the interview. I had an extremely limited budget for poets' travel expenses, which made it easier to interview London based poets. Pete Kalu was happy to be interviewed but did not wish his contribution to form part of the archive. There were many poets I wanted to interview but was not able to, mostly due to time constraints. I hope that the British Library will continue to expand the archive over the coming years. At time of writing the interviews are yet to be made available, however, they will be accessible for hundreds of years. The British Library takes an archival, institutional, long-term view. The interviews, just like a performance, capture a particular moment in the poet's life and thinking. The poets saw their interviews as more akin to a live performance intended to be responded to and experienced in the moment rather than a definitive document of their views. Several of the poets I interviewed at the beginning of my project later told me that their opinions or concerns have changed. Salena Godden has since decided not to donate her interview to the archive but has approved my use of quotations within this thesis and is keen to record another interview. Other poets were aware of the challenges of committing their views to a permanent archive and pre-empted the problem by refusing the interview – for instance the poet Jay Bernard told me they were in the process of re-thinking their approach to performance and were ambivalent about the term 'performance poet', therefore did not want to go on record discussing performance at that moment in time. My focus on discussions with poets about their approaches to performance has impacted my tendency in this thesis to centre the poet's own framing and references and my caution in introducing a frame of reference or critical approach that I cannot trace in our interviews. This is not a rule but a general guiding principle that I bend when bending it feels worthwhile.

Some chapters include audio files providing quotations from my interviews with poets

for the British Library, from various poetry performances and my own demonstrations. The chapter on David J includes an annotated video of his performance of 'This is What We Do'. Audio and audiovisual files are embedded in the PDF version and can be accessed by opening the document in the latest Adobe Reader (available from <http://get.adobe.com/uk/reader/otherversions/>).

I have used the MLA referencing system but have included full website addresses in my bibliography as it is necessary to view various Youtube videos as well as listening to the embedded files. All Youtube videos are also available as downloaded files should accessing them online pose difficulties. The British library archive is not yet published. Interviews can be provided on request.

The archive contains interviews with Raymond Antrobus, Dean Atta, Malika Booker, Kayo Chingonyi, Inua Ellams, Anthony Joseph, Ria Jade Hartley, Joshua Idehen, Keith Jarrett, David J, Chanje Kunda, Deanna Rodgers, Jacob Sam-La Rose, Andra Simons, Lemn Sissay, Mark Mace Smith, Paula Varjack, Indigo Williams and Karen McCarthy Woolf.

Chapter one

“Titles, Labels & Names”

This introductory chapter unpacks and contextualises the components of my thesis title in six sections. “Roots and heritages” considers the history of black British poetry in performance. It traces performances and poets that have informed and paved the way for many poets performing today and considers some of the artistic, critical and creative debates their work has engendered. “Poetry in performance” outlines the current poetry scene in the UK. It considers the state of criticism of poetry in performance and of the work of poets of colour. It explores some of the conflicts around coupling ‘black British’ with ‘poetry in performance’ and the ways in which labels can be used to exclude poets and their work from critical conversations. It discusses creative labelling of poets by the organisation Apples and Snakes on flyers from poetry events in the eighties and draws on my interviews to consider how self-naming can be a positive and creative act. “Black British” considers ways in which the descriptor is used, how I am using it and how some of my interviewees position themselves in relation to the descriptor. The fourth section, “A psychophysical approach” explains my use of the term ‘psychophysical’, which I have borrowed from the theatre director and academic Phillip Zarrilli. “Live writing” illustrates live writing through consideration of ‘My Mother’s Blues’, a poem by Malika Booker. The final section, “Live Writing and the Avant-garde” explores avant-garde poetics and poststructuralist debates on authorship and presence in relation to poetry performance and race.

1.1 Roots and heritages

The performance poetry of Britain today has multiple roots and histories. As John Foley points out, ‘oral poetry is an international medium’ and the practice of speaking poetry, story and lyric to an audience has been a part of human experience for as long as can be traced (11). Stories of oral poetry might take us back to African Griots, to slave songs, to preaching in black American and Caribbean churches, to Calypso and Dub. We might travel back to ancient Greece and Homer, or to Beowulf and medieval minstrels and Chaucer. Some chroniclers of poetry in performance pinpoint a specific event as the progenitor of today’s form. Don Cusic (75-85), Peter Middleton (61) and Billy Collins all cite the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg’s performance of *Howl*, Collins stating that ‘more

than any other link to the present-day era, Allen Ginsberg's 1956 Gallery Six reading of "Howl" leads into today's [sic] performance poetry' (Eleveld 12). Peter Barry describes The International Poetry Incarnation of June 1965 for which Ginsberg performed the same poem in the Albert Hall as a major transforming event of the era (13). Ginsberg was joined by eighteen other white male poets, predominantly from the States, Scotland and England, with just one (Pablo Armando Fernandez) from the Caribbean (Cuba), which suggests that although the event was impactful and international, it was less pivotal in heralding the diversity that is central to British poetry performance today.

Anne Walmsley writes that Kamau Brathwaite's performance of *Rites of Passage* two years later in 1967 at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre in London was a seminal moment in postcolonial poetry and key to introducing the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) to the public (59).² *Rites of Passage* was published by Oxford University Press, also marking a pivotal moment in Caribbean poetry publishing in Britain. Previously Derek Walcott was the only Caribbean poet to have been published by a major British house (Jonathan Cape) (59-60). The event helped publicise New Beacon Books, a bookseller and 'the UK's first black publisher' founded by John La Rose (co-founder of the Caribbean Artists Movement) in 1966. *Rites of Passage* is an epic narrative recounting a journey from the Caribbean to London and New York and back to the Caribbean, 'the first major poem to articulate the experience and condition of the West Indian immigrant in Britain' (59). Walmsley comments this was also a first as 'a one-person poetry reading' and broke ground for Caribbean poetry in terms of its rhythm, language, and use of creole (60). In Brathwaite's seminal talk 'History of the voice' (1971), he points out that the 'hurricane does not roar in pentameter' and describes creole and the rhythms of Caribbean English as 'nation language', a form of language and rhythm that: 'approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience. We have been trying to break out of the entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system that more closely and intimately approaches our own experience' (265). Walmsley describes *Rites of Passage* as achieving this 'new', 'ancient', and 'traditional' play with language (Brathwaite 259). Walmsley writes that freed of iambic pentameter it has:

rhythms which echo jazz, blues and calypso, and which approximate to the varied

² The Caribbean Artist Movement was founded in 1966 out of talks between Kamau Brathwaite, Andrew Salkey and John La Rose. CAM was formally in existence only for five years but introduced Caribbean art to a wide audience and had lasting influence.

speech patterns of Caribbean people. The language likewise reflects the complete continuum of Caribbean speech, cutting between international standard English, Caribbean English, and creole, with appropriateness and fluency. (59)

Brathwaite's challenge to the pentameter has had an influence on British poets generations later, who continue this postcolonial claiming of multiple languages and rhythms that reach back to African and Caribbean roots, and forwards into dub, rap and hip hop. Brathwaite's own influences criss-cross the Atlantic. He describes the importance of T.S. Eliot's readings for Caribbean poetry and literature in introducing the rhythms of the conversational speaking voice:

In that dry deadpan delivery, the 'riddims' of St Louis (though we did not know the source then) were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy, and Klook. And it is interesting that, on the whole, the establishment could not stand Eliot's voice – and far less jazz. (286)

David Dabydeen, a generation later, writes about his use of Guyanese creole in his poetry collection *Slave Song*, first published in 1984. Like Brathwaite, he found connections between Caribbean uses of language and Western traditions, particularly medieval alliterative verse: 'The sheer naked energy and brutality of the language, its "thew & sinew," reminded me immediately of the creole of my childhood' (303).

Dabydeen describes the percussive and musical properties of creole:

Words are spat out from the mouth like live squibs, not pronounced with elocution. English diction is cut up, and this adds to the abruptness of the language: *what* for instance becomes *wha* (as in *whack*), the splintering making the language more barbaric. Soft vowel sounds are habitually converted: the English tend to be polite in *war*, whereas the creole *warre* produces an appropriate snarling sound; *scorn* becomes *scan*, *water wata*, and so on. (302)

Dabydeen describes an approach to working with the sounds of language that can be heard in the work of many of today's black British poets, who may not directly use creole in their poetry (or daily lives), but often have a similarly musical approach to

composing with the sounds of language.³ Dabydeen highlights ways in which words can be snarled, spat and splintered, impacting the listener with their sonic properties. This is a feature that can be heard in hip hop today in which sparring poets compete with the virtuosity of their style and musicality as much as their message. In her Preface to *Filigree: Contemporary Black British Poetry*, Dorothy Wang writes:

Black British – and by this I mean black and Asian – poets not only refuse to be silenced or erased, they actively deploy and change English-language poetics, whether by means of ‘non-standard’ English, such as pidgin and patois, and the use of non-English languages and scripts or the techniques of fragmentation and erasure, among formal techniques. (Parkes 17)

Wang’s summary might also include performance techniques; vocal techniques such as David J’s use of reversed speech and sudden cuts between contrasting dynamics and speeds, Salena Godden’s facility in riffing on her own poems and Lemn Sissay’s extended introductions to and interruptions of his own poems are likewise modes of changing English-language poetics. Another feature heard in the work of many of today’s black British poets that can be traced back through Caribbean poetry is the integration of music and poetry, and the slippage from spoken word to song. The Jamaican performance poet Miss Lou (Louise Bennett) performed to crowded village halls throughout Jamaica from the late thirties to eighties. She was hugely popular amongst audiences but ignored by the establishment up until the post-independence seventies when the use of nation language became acceptable (Brathwaite 282). Today’s poets in Britain working across music and poetry, song and speech include Zena Edwards who sings, speaks, and accompanies herself with her kora and kalimba, Anthony Joseph and the Spasm band and Salena Godden with SaltPeter. Another strand of Caribbean influence is heard in the dub influenced poetry of Jean “Binta” Breeze and the dub poetry of Benjamin Zephaniah and Roger Robinson – poets performing in a tradition spearheaded by Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ) who has performed with dub musicians and as a solo poet using dub rhythms and nation language as a form of resistance since the early seventies.

LKJ was a young member of the Caribbean Artist Movement, and a youth member of

³ In chapter five I consider David J’s creole-like word play and verbal percussive dance with the sounds of language.

the Black Panthers. He was brought up in Jamaica and moved to England aged eleven. He describes exploring the ‘tension between Jamaican creole, Jamaican English and between those and English English’ (*Dread, Beat and Blood* 8). LKJ’s poems deal with politics, racism and the experience of being black in Britain.⁴ In an interview with Burt Caesar he explains why he started writing:

my initial impetus to write had nothing to do with a feel for poetry or a grounding in poetry, rather it was an urgency to express the anger and the frustrations and the hopes and the aspirations of my generation growing up in this country under the shadow of racism. (64)

Alistair Niven, in an essay on ‘Black Men’s Poetry in Britain’, included in a 1996 anthology of essays, comments that LKJ:

has one of the largest popular followings, but it is almost exclusively among black people. I have seen him hold a full theatre rapt as he recites poems that appear banal on the printed page. (303)

That LKJ’s following is almost exclusively black (according to Niven) is couched in a ‘but’ – a concession that would not be used by white critics discussing white poets (with predominantly white audiences). The other aspect of his comment may be intended to emphasise the power of LKJ’s performance, but his subjective contrasting of an audience ‘rapt’ in performance in response to poetry that ‘appears banal on the printed page’ does not acknowledge that the poem perhaps only ‘appears banal’ on the page to a reader unfamiliar with the language and rhythms who cannot ‘hear’ it as they read. This is clearly demonstrated by Richard Bradford, writing surprisingly recently (2010). In *Poetry: The Ultimate Guide*, Bradford focuses on how poets make use of Jakobson’s notion of a ‘double pattern’, which he sees as ‘the unique, definitive feature of verse’

⁴ At the same time as Brathwaite’s *Rites of Passage* performance brought Caribbean writing to the attention of wider audiences in London, the country was becoming dangerously racist. Just one year later, (in 1980) Enoch Powell delivered his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech. LKJ’s poetry responds to the racism he experienced and saw in London in the eighties. His poem ‘Sonny’s Lettah’ protests the SUS law (The ‘Sus law’ – from ‘suspected person’ gave the police powers to stop and search people on the street without any evidence. The controversial law was protested in the race riots of the 1980s. It was repealed in 1981). LKJ also wrote about the New Cross fire, the Notting Hill Carnival conflicts and the Brixton riots.

(xi).⁵ However, he cannot find it in LKJ's work: 'Kwesi Johnson swamps the double pattern with non-poetic registers that are largely exclusive to African Caribbeans' (216). With this comment Bradford reveals that he does not view the rhythms and rhymes of dub poetry as 'poetic', and that he does not view the tensions between the alternative grammars and syntaxes of multiple Englishes as a kind of double (or triple) pattern. Instead he describes creole as 'uncooperative vocabulary', stating that 'even the most unbiased, indulgent reader can only, at best, pick out verbs and nouns and some connectives while remaining alienated from the deep structure of the poem'. He adds the admission 'that such a reader is white' (Ibid.). These white-centred approaches to LKJ's work reveal that as well as the absence of in depth criticism of poetry performance there is often also a gulf in white critics' understanding of the poetics and performances of poets of colour (as is explored in chapter three, "Ways of Listening").⁶ As Dorothy Wang points out, 'the unspoken assumption behind what was and is considered great English poetry is that it is white, English, male (and usually not working-class) (Parkes 14).

Alongside and following LKJ are poets who also write in nation language including Caribbean poet Jean "Binta" Breeze, who has moved between homes in Britain and Jamaica, Grace Nichols and John Agard, who were both born in Guyana and moved together to Britain in their twenties. Fred D'Aguiar was born in London in 1960 then spent ten years in Guyana before returning to England. D'Aguiar describes how his impressions of the Caribbean collided with the rhythms of English:

I therefore have a twin heritage—literature written by other Caribbean writers about a Caribbean setting that I know, and literature about an English landscape or location. In my poems I wanted to put the two against each other. I wanted to use an English way of speaking that went back to Wordsworth and before, and set against it a countrified, Guyanese experience, including the creole language. (Birbalsingh 138)

⁵ The 'double pattern' refers to the relationship between the syntax of English and poetic conventions such as metre, lineation, rhythm and rhyme) (Bradford, *A Linguistic History* 6). It was introduced by Jakobson in his essay, 'Linguistics and Poetics'.

⁶ I am a 'white critic' myself. My research cannot help being impacted by my own experiences, and absence of experiences as a white woman and a poet with a background in theatre and music. I have tried to navigate my own limitations by balancing working to my strengths with learning about black cultural practices and semantics that I have no prior experience of, but that have emerged through my research as exciting reference points in relation to the work of my case studies.

Patience Agbabi is a black British poet born to Nigerian parents in London in 1965, raised by white foster parents in Surrey and rural Wales, and Oxford educated. Agbabi cites her influences as Chaucer, Browning, Wordsworth, Eliot and Pound – as Lauri Ramey notes, all poets ‘who refused that line of demarcation between “page and “performance”’ (‘Diaspora and the Avant-Garde’ 96). Agbabi also draws on “British hip hop, rap poetics, wry references to Nigerian cultural behaviours, and cyberculture’ (Ibid. 87). Agbabi notes on her blog that although *Telling Tales*, her remix of The Canterbury Tales, draws on a range of forms (*‘From the grime to the clean-cut iambic,/ rime royale, rant or rap, get our slam kick’*) some critics have described the work as mostly being written in rap. Agbabi jokes: ‘Maybe it’s because I is Black and have occasionally written raps’. In fact, Agbabi uses multiple poetic forms including only two raps. She comments this is in part as she was aware of Baba Brickman’s existing rap version (‘NOT “The Rap Canterbury Tales”’). Agbabi’s, Brickman’s and Jean “Binta” Breeze’s versions of Chaucer, (Breeze’s ‘The Wife of Bath’ uses Jamaican creole and brings Chaucer into today’s multi-cultural Britain by situating The Wife in a busy Brixton market) are all examples of how black British poetry draws on multiple heritages. To quote Ramey: ‘we can look to the privileging of oral tradition in the African diaspora as having created hospitable terrain, just as we can also credit lyric poetry’s oral roots’ (‘Diaspora and the Avant-Garde’ 129).

Neither critics nor poets work in vacuums. When analysing poetry in performance the critic needs to consider the poet’s possible influences, heritages and roots alongside an awareness of their (our) own experiences, influences and limitations. There are no definitive ways of analysing a poetry performance. We need a multiplicity of analyses from a multiplicity of critics to begin to truly appreciate and enjoy the art and craft of poetry in performance.

1.2 Poetry in performance

Today most cities and towns in the UK have regular poetry nights: simple ‘poetry readings’ in small rooms with no microphones, such as the ‘Plymouth Language Club’ held at the back of the Plymouth Arts Centre; big poetry slams that bring together universities with competing teams from across the UK, such as ‘Unislam’. There are programmed events in pubs and theatres with high production values such as ‘Rally and Broad’ in Edinburgh and ‘Bang Said the Gun’ and ‘Tongue Fu’ in London. The T.S.

Eliot prize annual reading is a high profile event held at the Royal Festival Hall. Schools host performances after a year with a writer in residence through organisations such as ‘First Story’, or Goldsmiths University’s ‘Spoken Word Educator’ programme. There are music and literature festivals that programme poets, such as Latitude, Port Eliot festival, Cheltenham and Ledbury to name a few. As well as live events, poets are on TV, from documentaries to adverts, and are featured on radio programmes such as Radio 3’s *The Verb* and Radio 4’s *Poetry Please*; Radio 6 champions spoken word poets such as Kate Tempest. BBC Radio 1Extra ran ‘Words First’ with London’s Roundhouse, mentoring and profiling six poets (or ‘spoken word artists’) aged 18-24. The BBC teamed up with performance poetry organisation ‘Apples and Snakes’ and ‘Wreaking Ball Press’ (a small Hull based independent press) to create numerous poetry events live and on air as part of Hull’s City of Culture 2017 ‘Contains Strong Language’ festival. Poetry is flooding social media: Youtube videos of poets go ‘viral’ (such as Hollie McNish’s ‘Embarrassed’), poets such as Warsan Shire, known for her ‘aphoristic two-liners’ build their readership through Twitter (Duggan), and the ‘Instagram Poets’ (such as ‘Atticus’ and Rupi Kaur) reach massive audiences writing specifically for this short epigrammic (and programmatic) visual form.

Today’s poetry world is sprawling and diverse. New poets can find many entrance points to it, the most accessible of which are provided by social media platforms and open mic nights. The simplicity of the form, needing nothing more than a microphone (and often not even that) makes poetry in performance accessible, as does the welcoming nature of many open mic nights, where new poets can try out poems prior to those who are paid to perform. London has many low cost and free opportunities for young poets and performers to develop their craft, such as the Roundhouse Poetry Collective (18-25yrs) and Barbican Young Poets (14-25yrs). Although rarer in rural areas, other large cities have similar diverse groups offering performance and training opportunities to young people, such as Beatfreaks in Birmingham, The Writing Squad in the North of England (16-21yrs), and Mouthy Poets in Nottingham.⁷ This accessibility has contributed to the diversity seen in audiences and on stages at poetry events across the UK.

⁷ The Mouthy Poets announced they were ending their work in January 2017. They were founded by Deborah Stevenson in 2010, and over six years produced: ‘11 Say Sum Thin shows, a national tour, an international exchange, a sister collective in Germany, the region’s biggest inter-school poetry slam, two albums, scholarships, commissions, publications and more’ (‘Mouthy Poets is coming to an end’).

The more popular poetry in performance becomes, the more apparent is the lack of academic and critical engagement with the form. The absence of critical writing on poetry in performance has been reviewed by academics including Julia Novak in *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* and Peter Middleton in chapter two 'Poetry's Oral Stage' of his study *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*. Marit J. MacArthur, who is currently developing software for analysing intonation of poetry performance, observes: 'the study of lyric poetry remains largely a page-based scholarship' ('Monotony' 43). The American poet and scholar Charles Bernstein summarises:

This absence of documentation, together with the tendency among critics and scholars to value the written word over the performed text, has resulted in a remarkable lack of engagement given to the poetry reading as a medium in its own right, a medium that has had a profound impact on twentieth-century poetry, and in particular the poetry of the second half of the century. (22)

As Bernstein's summary suggests, critics and scholars typically only discuss poets when their work is published. In *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, Adriana Cavarero points out that the actual heard voice, the 'unique' voice, is not studied in any field – musicology, linguistics, literary criticism, cultural studies or philosophy due to the privileging of the semantic. She writes that speech must be pulled 'from the deadly grip of logocentricism' (15). The still prevalent critical elevation of the page is not reflective of the careers of poets, many of whom publish in performance alongside the page, do not prioritise one over the other, and often have very successful careers without publishing a poetry collection at all. Fred D'Aguiar writes in his introductory comments to *The New British Poetry 1968-88* that he is: 'hardpressed to confine a poet to one realm or the other. At the level of composition many poets are moving towards a coalition of the two: the performance poem which also works on the page' (4). This still applies today; there are very few poets who publish on the page but do not read/perform, and very few who read/perform but do not publish.

Although in depth analysis of poetry in performance is still lacking, histories of poetry performance are being filled in and there is growing awareness of the need for more critical approaches to poetry in performance. In 2004 Jayne Fenton Keane wrote in a

blog: ‘Performance poetry will not realise its full potential without a critical framework with which to approach it’. *Sabotage Reviews* is an online magazine set up by Claire Trévien in 2010 ‘to provide dynamic commentary and reviews of small-scale and ephemeral literature that might not otherwise receive such critical and public attention’. Their site includes reviews of pamphlets, short stories and poetry performances. In a recent article ‘The Challenges of Reviewing Spoken Word’ Trévien calls for more reviewers and comments on ‘the lack of a strong reviewing culture around spoken word’. She reports that they have struggled to find reviewers of spoken word, and that reviewers are often cautious or wholly positive, revealing the challenges of a close-knit community in which reviewers are usually also poets themselves.

Outside academia, or perhaps blurring its boundaries, are several Arts Council funded projects such as Tim Wells’ study of ranting poets, ‘Stand Up and Spit’ which includes a website with archival documentation and a programme of events, talks and performances, including *Talking Liberties: Ranting poets, ’zines and angry kids of the ’80s* which featured a panel discussion with Salena Godden and others at the British Library. Peter Bearder has received Arts Council funding to write a book with the working title *Stage Invasion: Poetry, Renewal and the Spoken Word Renaissance*, about professional practice, performance discipline and the political dimensions of spoken word poetry (personal communication). Apples and Snakes received Arts Council and Heritage Lottery funding to produce an online ‘Spoken Word’ archive that records their work since the early eighties.

American scholarship is ahead of the UK in its consideration of rap and hip hop poetics, with scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson and Marcyliena Morgan (the executive director of the ‘Hip hop Archive and Research Institute’ at Harvard University) writing on the sociocultural and ethnographic aspects of hip hop within African and African American Studies. Adam Bradley’s *Book of Rhymes. The Poetics of Hip Hop* maps techniques and discusses rappers’ creative processes, providing points of reference for my “British Spoken Word Voice” chapter. *The BreakBeat Poets, New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop*, as well as presenting a range of contemporary American poet-performers, offers some introductory provocations for ways of talking about poetry in performance, such as Patrick Rosal’s essay ‘The Art of the Mistake: Some Notes on Breaking as Making’. Rosal discusses the ‘break’ as a writing strategy: ‘The *break* is the moment when everything in a song stops – except for the drums and bass or the

drums alone' (322). Rosal explores how in poetry the 'break' might occur when the line breaks, or when the poem stops. It can be denoted on the page with '—' or '/' as in the typography of poet Etheridge Knight who, Rosal suggests, borrows '—' from Emily Dickinson. Rosal writes 'an artist breaks only by being vulnerable to his own breaking' (324, 325). Rosal leaves it to his readers to fill in some of the gaps left by the breaks in his discourse; others might find ways to apply this 'break' strategy to the analysis of poetry in performance. Geneva Smitherman's comprehensive and brilliant book published in the seventies, *Talkin and Testifyin, The Language of Black America* provides a detailed analysis of the roots of discourse found in hip hop such as 'testifyin' and 'signifyin' as well as a discussion of 'tonal semantics', intonation and 'talk-singing' which she traces back to African traditions. Smitherman describes 'tonal semantics' as the 'use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in black communication' (134). I draw on Smitherman's studies when discussing the talk-singing of Salena Godden and the freestyling techniques of David J.

As mentioned above, an important figure who refers to the sound of poetry in performance is the Caribbean critic and poet Kamau Brathwaite, whose discussions of 'nation language' confirms a core principle adhered to in this study:

the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say), then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning. (271)

Brathwaite reclaims the poetry of 'noise' found in the oral tradition. In a footnote he explains: 'Noise is that decorative energy that invests the nation performance' (301). His use of the word 'decorative' might suggest that the noise is not integral. He says it is: 'Unnecessary but without which not enough' (Ibid.). This suggests that the noise *is* necessary; it must be, if it is 'part of the meaning' (271). Brathwaite traces possible heritages of Caribbean rhetoric and poetry back to oral traditions of West Africa. He makes strong arguments for connections and legacies, discussing the African concept of *nommo* (the power/magic of the word) (238).

Ruth Finnegan's research reveals that there is a strong element of 'live writing' within oral literatures:

What might be called the ‘same’ poem or prose piece tends to be variable to such an extent that one has to take some account at least of the original contribution of the artist who is actualizing it – and not simply in terms of the technique of delivery. (*Oral Literature in Africa* 19)

In this sense the oral literature performer is also the writer, at whatever point they are on the continuum ‘between the extremes of totally new creation and memorized reproduction of set pieces’ (Ibid.18). However, there is usually no page version at all, encapsulated by Finnegan’s term ‘unwritten literature’ and the poetry in question is not usually ‘authored’ by one poet as it is in contemporary poetic practice. Although there are parallels, particularly when it comes to the practices of live composition that are heard both in oral literature and in the freestyling of today’s hip hop poets, it is these compositional differences that define today’s contemporary poetry and differentiate my study of contemporary poetry in performance from studies of oral literature.

Julia Novak has a website with embedded videos to accompany *Live Poetry: An Integrated approach to Poetry in Performance*. Apart from within studies of oral literature, which do not focus on analysing contemporary poetry performances, it is still unusual to find in depth analysis of an actual poetry performance. Julia Novak suggests that this may be:

due in part to the fact that live poetry bears not only literary but also musical (speech melody, rhythm , etc.) and theatrical (mimic, gesture, etc.) features, which complicate its unambiguous allocation to traditional research disciplines and review categories. (11)

Where there is analysis of poetry in performance, the challenges Novak outlines have impacted on the academics’ conclusions.⁸ Novak’s monograph is the only current study that focuses entirely on the question of how to analyse poetry in performance. Novak sets out to develop ‘a systematic approach to live poetry that is suitable for the study of contemporary popular forms such as “performance poetry” as well as more traditional

⁸ In the following chapter, “Ways of Listening”, I discuss this issue in relation to Novak’s examples, Jonathan Culler’s brief discussion of rap in *Theory of the Lyric*, and Derek Attridge’s analysis of an Ice-T rap (‘Rap before Rap’).

poetry “readings” (11-12). She outlines a ‘toolkit’ that culminates in ‘a checklist for the analysis of live poetry that is intended as a practical aid for the researcher’ (13).

Novak starts from the methodology, aiming for an approach that can be applied to any poetry reading or performance. She uses her examples to illustrate the methodology, an approach that often means she does not consider the poet in the context of their other work, other poets, influences and creative heritages. She includes only one full analysis of a poem in performance (less than five percent of her total thesis). My research shares Novak’s long-term goal, ‘to bring live poetry into the mainstream of literary research and criticism’ (14). I contribute to this goal by starting from the poet rather than a methodological toolkit, embedding the analysis of performed poetry throughout, and by dedicating half of this thesis to in depth analysis of poetry performances.

1.2.1 Critical engagement with today’s “black British poetry in performance”

A connected issue to the lack of critical engagement with poetry in performance is the lack of critical engagement with poetry authored by poets of colour.⁹ As Dave Coates reports on his blog, in spite of recent improvements poetry authored by in the numbers of poets of colour being published and recognised by the big prizes, (Jay Bernard, Sarah Howe, Vahni Capildeo, Claudia Rankine, and Kei Miller have won prestigious prizes in the last few years), critical discourse has not kept up: ‘the most common response to work by poets of colour has been total silence’ (‘The State of Poetry Criticism’). When the critics have been forced to pay attention, such as when Sarah Howe won the 2015 T.S. Eliot Prize, they have struggled, revealing the level of sexism, ageism and racism still present in mainstream literary criticism.¹⁰ As Dave Coates identifies in ‘The State of Poetry Criticism’, reviewers and poets of colour are under-represented in broadsheet and journal publications. Coates has run some numbers (counting reviews and articles published in ‘the most prestigious publishers of criticism’ over 24 months between April/Spring 2015 and May 2017) and identifies that:

⁹ The poet and critic Sandeep Parmar has set up ‘The Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics’, a mentoring programme to encourage diversity in poetry reviewing culture to support BAME poetry reviewers.

¹⁰ Katy Evans-Bush reported for the *Guardian* that an anonymous writer in *Private Eye* suggested that Howe’s win had something to do with how ‘presentable’ ‘young’ and ‘Anglo-Chinese’ she is. Oliver Thring’s review in the *Sunday Times Magazine* was damning with its faint praise and patronising descriptions. In response to criticism he Tweeted: ‘This gentle interview with a leading young poet has led various deranged poetesses to call me thick, sexist etc...’ This sparked a Twitter storm with the hashtag ‘deranged poetess’ (Evans-Bush).

In this data set, only twenty articles were written by just twelve critics of colour. For comparison, 18 articles were written by white critics named David, and 39 articles were written by white women named Katherine.

The absence of critical engagement with poetry in performance and with the work of poets of colour are connected in complex ways, making my project, with its linking of ‘performance’ with ‘black British’ poets potentially problematic. On the one hand scholars (such as myself) are trying to elevate performance by developing a critical language with which to discuss it, whilst on the other, many poets of colour wish to distance themselves from performance, mainly thanks to, as Rommi Smith outlined in the Free Verse Report, an ‘expectation that minority ethnic poets are performance poets’ which is ‘often used in a dismissive way’ (8).¹¹

Parallel to this, some scholars wish to carve out performance poetry as a distinct research area in order to give it greater importance or validity as an academic field. Labels place subjects into categories, and this is useful within academia; the carving out of a new area of investigation, such as ‘performance poetry’ and the academic as ‘expert in performance poetry’, is a neat way of identifying a field of research that can be defined, delimited, analysed and defended. Cornelia Gräbner, in her thesis *Off the page and off the stage: the performance of poetry and its public function* differentiates between ‘poetry readings’ and ‘poetry performances’ (3). She writes: ‘On a theoretical level, my argument seeks to contribute to the debate of whether “performance poetry” is a poetic genre in its own right’ (73). Two years earlier Samera Owusu Tutu wrote in ‘The Resounding Underground: Performance Poetry in the UK today’ that ‘this debate marks the birth of consciousness of performance poetry as a genre in its own right’ (168). Referencing Tutu’s essay, in ‘The Features and Meanings of Orality in Black British Performance Poetry’ Andrea Sand and Merle Tönnies point out that although this poetry is often published, performance poetry is ‘a special kind of poetry which is increasingly recognised as a separate genre by authors and critics alike’ (105).

The impulse of academics to delineate this research area is at odds with those poets who

¹¹ The Free Verse Report was produced by the London based writer development agency ‘Spread the Word’. The Arts Council England, Scottish Arts Council and Arts Council Wales commissioned ‘Spread The Word’ in 2005 to research why so few black and Asian poets had been published in the UK over the previous ten years. It was edited by Danuta Kean and published in 2008.

are trying to distance themselves from labels such as ‘performance poet’ in response to a context in which poets who are known as performers are often not taken seriously as writers. It also fails to sufficiently acknowledge that nearly all poets who perform also publish on the page. In our interview Malika Booker recounts becoming aware in the nineties of a shift in how the ‘performance poet’ was viewed. Booker ‘began to see that “performance poet” meant that you don’t have craft’ and how for her ‘own development [she] needed to step away from that term and all the connotations it had’. Although a brilliant performer who has dedicated years to developing her craft, Booker decided to consciously distance herself from performance. I began this research in 2013, at which point Booker told me although she was aware of the call for proposals for this Ph.D., she did not apply out of concern it would limit her within academia; the fact that this is not a fear I have speaks to my own white privilege.

Booker was one of the first poets selected by the ‘Complete Works Programme’, a mentoring scheme with the objective to increase diversity in British publishing. The scheme was founded by Bernardine Evaristo following the Free Verse Report published in 2008, which found that only 1% of books published in the UK were by black and Asian poets. The scheme has launched its third anthology, *Ten: Poets of the New Generation* with Bloodaxe. A follow up report, the ‘Free Verse Report’ is currently being compiled by Natalie Teitler (director of the Complete Works) and is expected to celebrate that now 16% of poets published by major UK presses are Black or Asian. The statistics look good, however, as Sandeep Parmar pointed out at the *The Complete Works Diversity in UK Poetry Conference* (November 2017), Faber and Faber have never published a collection by a woman of colour, Picador has a poor record of publishing poets of colour and the 2017 T.S. Eliot shortlist (judged by an all white panel) includes only one poet of colour (the winner, Ocean Vuong).

At the launch of the second anthology, *Ten: The New Wave*, Bernardine Evaristo said, referring to performance poetry: ‘This may be controversial, but I think it’s a separate genre’ (qtd. in Bartleby). Although this echoes the academics who wish to make ‘performance poetry’ its own research area, Evaristo’s comment is tied up with the problem that the descriptor is often used in a derogatory sense to mean, as Booker says, poets ‘who don’t have craft’ (interview). Evaristo’s wish to distance page from performance intends to combat the assumption that a poet of colour is ‘one of those performance poets’ (Smith, ‘Free Verse Report’ 8). Distancing the poets published

through the Complete Works scheme from performance could be (and the success of the scheme suggests it is) an effective way of ensuring the poets in question (many of whom are well known performers) are taken seriously as writers. All the poets I interviewed for the British Library describe themselves as ‘poets’ rather than ‘performance poets’ although most agreed that the issue is not so much the label, but the way in which it is often used. Inua Ellams (who was published alongside Kayo Chingonyi in *Ten: The New Wave*) summarises:

I think the putting of it in another camp is what’s problematic, not the label of itself. I think it’s used to belittle that art form a lot by the poetry establishment in this country. That’s what I rebel against more than the label itself. I’ve always written and I’ve always performed. (interview)

The UK based Jamaican writer Kei Miller was a guest speaker at the launch of *Ten: The New Wave*. He hid the fact he performed at slams in Manchester from his university tutor (and Carcanet editor) Michael Schmidt, and describes the complexity of being ashamed about winning those slams, and at the same time, ashamed of feeling shame (*Writing down the Vision* 146). He writes about anxiety around being seen as a performance poet:

I know my poems by heart, and even large passages from my novels, so the book or the page functions only as a prop that insists to my audience that my work is rooted on the page and that I am much more than a performance poet. But what does that mean? Is a performance poet necessarily inferior to a “page poet”? Once again, I find myself wondering about the places, the institutions, the audiences, the publishers and critics from whom I seem to be seeking validation. (147)

The fact that Miller has used the presence of the book onstage as a prop to signal that he is ‘much more than a performance poet’ and has played down his successes as a performer confirms that ‘performance poetry’ has an inferior status within the wider poetry establishment within which Miller says he seems to be ‘seeking validation’. The improvements in diversity within British publishing, and the successes of poets including Kei Miller, who won the Forward Prize a year after these observations, may eventually make it easier for poets of colour to discuss performance and indeed perform well without risk of marginalisation.

To further complicate the debate, there has been a recent gain in momentum of ‘spoken word’ as a term used separately to ‘poetry’ and even ‘performance poetry’. A young generation of ‘spoken word artists’ often emphasise spoken word as an oral form distinct to poetry on the page. BBC 1Extra contribute to the separation of terms by supplying a webpage linked to their ‘Words First’ mentoring scheme entitled ‘Spoken Word Explained’ in which they tell us that it differs from rap as it ‘tends to be a lot more straight to the point, avoiding complicated metaphors in favour of stripped back and straight to the point lyrics’. Solomon O.B, one of six poets selected by the Words First scheme, calls himself a ‘spoken word artist’ – totally eliminating the word ‘poet’ from his description. In a Youtube video he describes spoken word as ‘a performative version of poetry,’ clarifying, ‘what I do is really predicated on performance’ (‘Solomon O.B. TACT ambassador’). The BBC includes Kate Tempest on their list of ‘spoken word artists’, describing her as ‘spoken word artist, playwright and poet’, which suggests that ‘spoken word artist’ can be viewed as a role distinct from ‘poet’. Although she is often cited as one of the exponents of ‘spoken word’, Tempest has received various accolades as a ‘poet’ including a place on the 2014 ‘Next Generation Poets’ list and the 2013 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry. Tempest’s own website lists her as a musician, poet, novelist, and playwright.

If it were as simple as separating out a hip hop and grime influenced generation of ‘spoken word artists’ who do not publish their writing in print from ‘poets’ who write both in performance and on the page, a distinction of terms might be functional. My chapter on “British Spoken Word Voice” analyses a ‘spoken word’ delivery mode that could contribute to the question of whether and how spoken word can be differentiated from ‘poetry’. But many poets described as ‘spoken word artists’ publish their poems on the page and in performance. Many have been labelled with the descriptor ‘spoken word’ in spite of never using the term to describe their own work and not performing in the distinctive delivery mode often associated with the label. In *Black Music*, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka asks: ‘What is the definition of jazz? And who was authorized to make one?’ (22). His questions apply to poetry too. Who decides which camp a particular poet falls into? Who is authorised to do so? And how can this be done without prejudices and biases?

It is possible to acknowledge the differences between poetry in performance and on the

page without separating them into different genres. Deirdre Osborne, writing about the poets Lemn Sissay and SuAndi, explores the demands that poets who work across ‘literary genres and performance traditions’ make of the critic:

By frequently slipping between, and re-working, literary genres and performance traditions, their work raises questions about the need for critical languages which can meet the demands of the forms and experiential aesthetics they forge. Their work draws attention to the ways in which two distinct routes (literary criticism and performance analysis) offer an unsatisfactory separation of approaches. It ratifies the development of a lexicon and inter-referential analytical methodology that will service the critical requirements of generic and performance overlaps. (‘The Body of Text’ 232)

The analysis of poetry in performance requires a methodological approach that differs from literary criticism conducted from the page. Separating out the performance version of a poem from the page version of a poem is hardly a feasible approach; the two are connected and exist in the same psychophysicality of the poet. How can performance poetry be a ‘separate genre’ when a poet is performing poems that are published in a book too? Even acknowledging that there are different ‘versions’ of a poem on the page and in performance, we cannot separate the ‘poem in performance’ version from the ‘poem on page’ version. It is the duality of page and performance that makes poets different to actors who actualise existing texts by playwrights, novelists who may read in public but are rarely known as performers of their books, performance artists who do not publish texts, and oral literature which is often not written down at all but as Ruth Finnegan writes is ‘by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion – there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product’ (*Oral Literature in Africa* 5).

An analysis of a poem in performance does not necessitate ignoring the page version of the poem. We can acknowledge the differences between page-based and performance-based analysis, and the methodological approaches that are required, without separating the activities into different genres. The poets whose works I analyse in this thesis have been described as ‘performance poets’, ‘spoken word artists’ and ‘spoken word poets’, however, they rarely describe themselves in these ways. The business of labelling is uncomfortable and complex. As Salena Godden summarises in our interview: ‘lists and

prizes, boxes and labels are killing us'. However, naming can also be a creative act.

1.2.2 Jamish Pugilism

Apples and Snakes was founded in 1982 with a remit of representing marginalised voices. Today they continue to promote diversity within British poetry. Their archive of flyers from the early eighties reveals the inventive and varied ways in which the poets were described (Figures 2-6). The poet's name alone would not draw an audience; they needed to provide evocative descriptions to appeal to a 'non-poetry' audience. The organisation put on poetry events in a cabaret style, mixing poets with musicians and other entertainers. They programmed poets of all stripes: dub poets, ranting poets, sound poets and stand up poets. They programmed 'ranting poets' such as Seething Wells 'vitriolic Bradford ranter'; John Hegley with his 'holy doggerel'; Joolz, described on a flyer in 1984 as a 'sharp edged punk poet'; alongside Valerie Bloom, 'Jamaican dialect poet'; the Dub poet Levi Tafari appears in 1985. Jean "Binta" Breeze 'Jamaican Poet and Storyteller' and Jackie Kay 'Black Scottish Poet' are on a line up together in 1987. Adrian Mitchell appears in 1988 performing at a 'Jazz-Poetry Festival'. Bob Cobbing 'luminary sound poet' was programmed in 1989, along with John Cooper Clarke 'Punk Performance Poet'. Figure 1 shows an Apples and Snakes event from 1984 featuring Linton Kwesi Johnson: 'Miner Poets' was an event co-programmed by Apples and Snakes and the Poetry Society in aid of the National Union of Mineworkers.

Figure 1. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1984)



Figure 2. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1983)

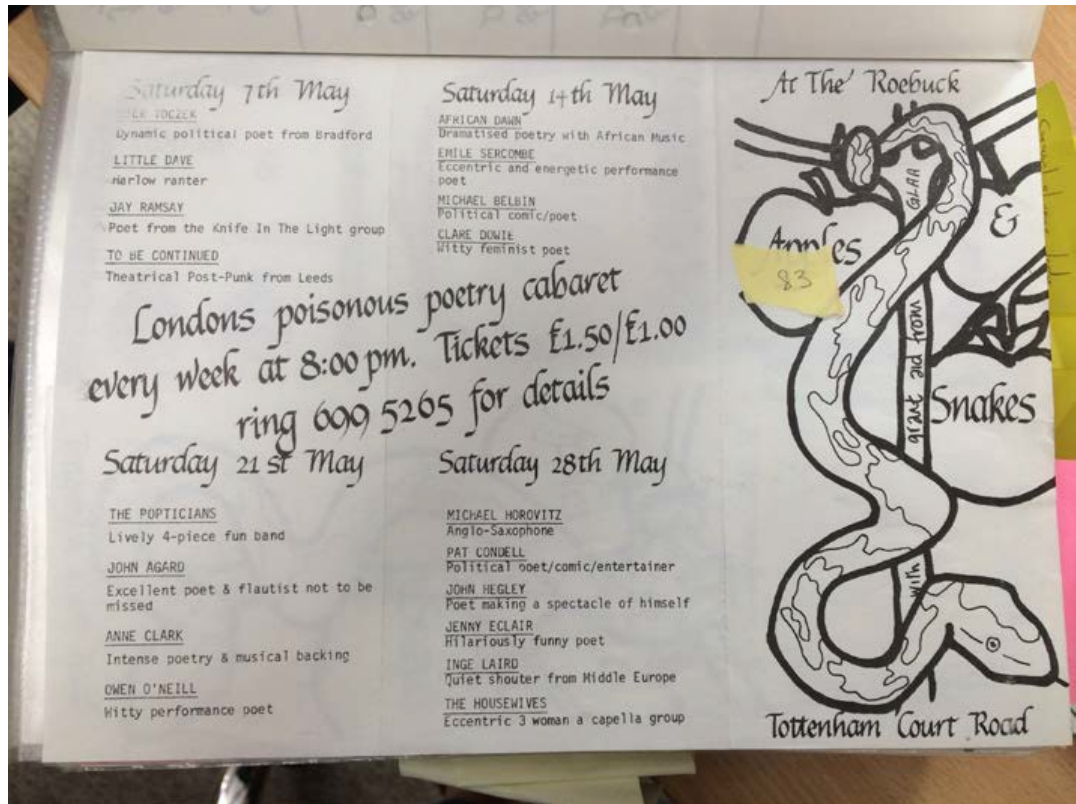


Figure 3. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1987)



Figure 4. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1988)



Figure 5. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1988)

APPLES & SNAKES
PERFORMANCE POETRY CABARET MUSIC
FEBRUARY every friday 8.30pm £3/£2
at the SEVEN DIALS/ COVENT GARDEN COMMUNITY CENTRE 46 Earlham St WC2
COVENT GARDEN

TELO. 01 - 690 9368

Fri 5th Feb John Hegley Spectacular Doppelgänger Porky the Poet Kosher Poet Audi Maserati Perf. Poet/Comic Crooner The Dinner Ladies Up-Tempo Off-Beat Band	Fri 12th Feb Joolz Prima Donna of Punk Sister Netifa Masimba Connection Poet Linda King Performance Poet Anna Palm Violin/Vocal Virtuoso
Fri 19th Feb Liz Lochhead Vibrant & Vigorous Poet Jackie Kay Black Scottish Poet Bridgit Bard Performance Poet Clea & McLeod Fierce Vocals & Double Bass	Fri 26th Feb 'CABARET 246' Peter Finch Poet-Inventor Duncan Bush Political Poet Ifor Thomas Wild Performance Poet Francesca Kay Satirical Fun Poet

every friday 8.30pm £3/£2

Access: 5

in assoc. with POETRY WALES PRESS

Figure 6. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1989)

APPLES & SNAKES
in assoc. with
LAMBETH AMENITY SERVICES
SATURDAY 11th MARCH
the ABENG COMMUNITY CENTRE
7 Gresham Rd (off Brixton Rd) SW9

Brother Resistance
Trinidadian Rapso Poet

Leonora Rogers-Wright
Compelling African Poet

Sister Netifa
'Uprising' Trinidadian Poet

Lemn Sissay
Powerful Black-British Performance Poet

Sista Culcha
Reggae Dee.Jay/ Poet & M.C.

Enqs/ Access Details: 01-690 9368
Tickets: £3/£2 8.00pm
BRIXTON

APPLES & SNAKES
Saturday 8th April
THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL POETRY FESTIVAL
at the InterChange 15 Wilkin Street NW5

The FESTIVAL will be a day-long programme of open debate, workshops & performance - a social & working meeting of poets, writers, musicians & artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, to celebrate & explore both specific & inter-cultural traditions - languages, styles, themes both oral & literary, moving from open debate, through working sessions, from practice to performance.

The emphasis of the day is very much on participation - & during the evening a performance will take place featuring all the poets/participants & musicians - & of which the celebratory climax will be the appearance of a mysterious internationally renowned JAZZ-DANCE BAND!

Simultaneous to the afternoon sessions a performance for kids will take place - featuring **JOHN AGARD & Co.**

Also, throughout the day, numerous artists will be exhibiting their work, & there will be book-stalls & displays - from Publishers & Presses with an international outlook.

Entrance to the workshops & evening performance is FREE to participants, just to the evening performance tickets are: £3/£2 concs.

The POETS-FACILITATORS for the day include:
ABDULLHA AL-UDHARI
BRIDGIT BARD
PETER FINCH
MAHMOOD JAMAL
JACKIE KAY
LINDA KING
AUDI MASERATI
ADRIAN MITCHELL
SISTER NETIFA
BROTHER NIYI
PITIKA NTULI
KWESI OWUSU
ELEAN THOMAS
NICK TOCZEK
MARG YEO
ANN ZIETY

+ many special guests including:
the ASIAN WOMENS' WRITING COLLECTIVE
& the
LATIN AMERICAN WRITERS GROUP

Full Access All Day: 11am - Midnight Kentish Town
Creche Food & Drink Enqs: 01-690 9368

Assisted by: L.A.C.S. & CAMDEN ARTS & ENTS.

The first mention of Lemn Sissay in the archive of flyers is from 1987 when he appears as ‘Exuberant Dub Poet’ (Figure 3). Sissay says in an interview with Deirdre Osborne that in the early days he was sometimes misdescribed as a Caribbean poet (‘The Body of Text’ 237). The description ‘Dub’ is inaccurate too. In the eighties his Northern accent was more pronounced, and he uses a regular beat in some of his poems, but no dub rhythms. A year later Sissay is on a lineup with Benjamin Zephaniah ‘Essential Dub Poet’ and is described as a ‘Progressive Poet’ (Figure 4). In 1989 Sissay is listed as ‘Powerful Black-British Performance poet’ (Figure 6). This is the first time the ‘Black British’ descriptor appears on an Apples and Snakes flyer since 1982 when they began hosting events.¹² (Jackie Kay is listed as ‘Black Scottish poet’ in 1988.) When Sissay appears on a flyer in December 1994, by which time the events had relocated to Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) for their fortnightly ‘poetry-cabaret’ (where the organisation was based at the time), there is a fuller description:

The 200 words a minute poetry wizard who has left his lyrical imprint on every conceivable medium returns to his new material – upbeat, hyperaccurate, live-vibe reflections on 1994. (Figure 7)

A year later, again at the Battersea Arts Centre a flyer reads: ‘Jean “Binta” Breeze & Lemn Sissay are among the strongest influences on the powerful new generation of poets rising up from the grass roots’.

The first appearance of Salena Godden is from the same year in an event at Battersea Arts Centre entitled ‘No Gods No Masters, breaking the rules of poetry’ (Figure 8). The blurb, beginning ‘gothic dance nonsense percussion pens are for signing-on with fuck you beardy rip up the pager read my lips skip trim tongue’ reads like a stream of consciousness creative word playing rant which Godden may or may not have had a hand in penning, but it does seem to capture the ‘punk-ass’ essence of her early days, as she describes in *Fishing in the Aftermath*, when poetry was her ‘world, it was loud and ranting’ and ‘there was some method in the madness and a fierce discipline through the booze and chaos’ (15-16).


¹² It is possible that they used the term earlier, I have not been able to view all flyers since 1982 as Apples and Snakes’ records have a few gaps.

Figure 7. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1994)

An electrifying new fortnightly
POETRY

An electrifying fortnightly season of poetry-cabaret at BAC
APPLES & SNAKES
 BAC, Lavender Hill, Battersea, London SW11
 doors 8.30pm admission £4.50 / £2.50 concs
 box office 071-223-2223

CAROUSEL OF VERSE
 friday 2 december



MAYA CHOWDHRY

Three women poets intricately interweave slide images and text to create breathtaking performance pieces.


Maya Chowdhry
Annandaa - The Goddess of Food
 Food becomes a symbol of a family at war - the kitchen its battleground as we trace a young, Indian woman's needs.

Dorothea Smartt
Medusa
 Incorporating the stunning photography of Sherlee Mitchell and Ingrid Pollard, to reclaim the myth of Medusa and examine identity, hair, perception, self-love.

Bushy Kelly
From Dark to Light or a Case of Mistaken Identity
 A brave personal and social documentary exploring the aesthetics of death and disability.

Bluesy singer-songwriter **Adeola** seals the night with her beautifully rich songs of love, rage and desire. "an impressive set" -Time Out

PANTORHYMES
 friday 16 december



EMILE SERCOMBE

In true Apples & Snakes style we present an end of year bash, seeing the old year out with an all new poetic concept featuring specially commissioned work and free cake!

Lemn Sissay
 The 200 words a minute poetry wizard who has left his lyrical imprint on every conceivable medium returns to perform his new material - upbeat, hyperaccurate, live-vibe reflections on 1994.

Giving traditional festive stories a poetic kick will be **Emile Sercombe**, fusing poetry and mime to commit extraordinary and subversive acts to riotous effect. Exciting verse performers, **Nick Eisen** and **Jaspre Barch** invite us to help **Save Santa** from privatisation!

The vibrant energies of poet **J.L Rogers-Wright** combine with fiery and innovative **Bridgit Bard** to present raucous and evocative interplay in a new party piece.

"Imaginatively programmed" . The Guardian

Our anthology, *The Popular Front of Contemporary Poetry* featuring the work of 50 poets including Benjamin Zephaniah, John Helgey, Jean 'Bima' Breeze, Ioolz, Liz Lochhead is on sale in the BAC bookshop.

APPLES & SNAKES

present a regular poetry & cabaret club at BAC, Lavender Hill, Friday from September to June

we showcase the best of contemporary performance poetry that is entertaining, provocative and stylistically diverse, ranging from rap to rock, from the comic to the political

is a pluricultural agency for poets from all cultural backgrounds

LONDON ARTS BOARD

LONDON BOROUGHS

How to find BAC


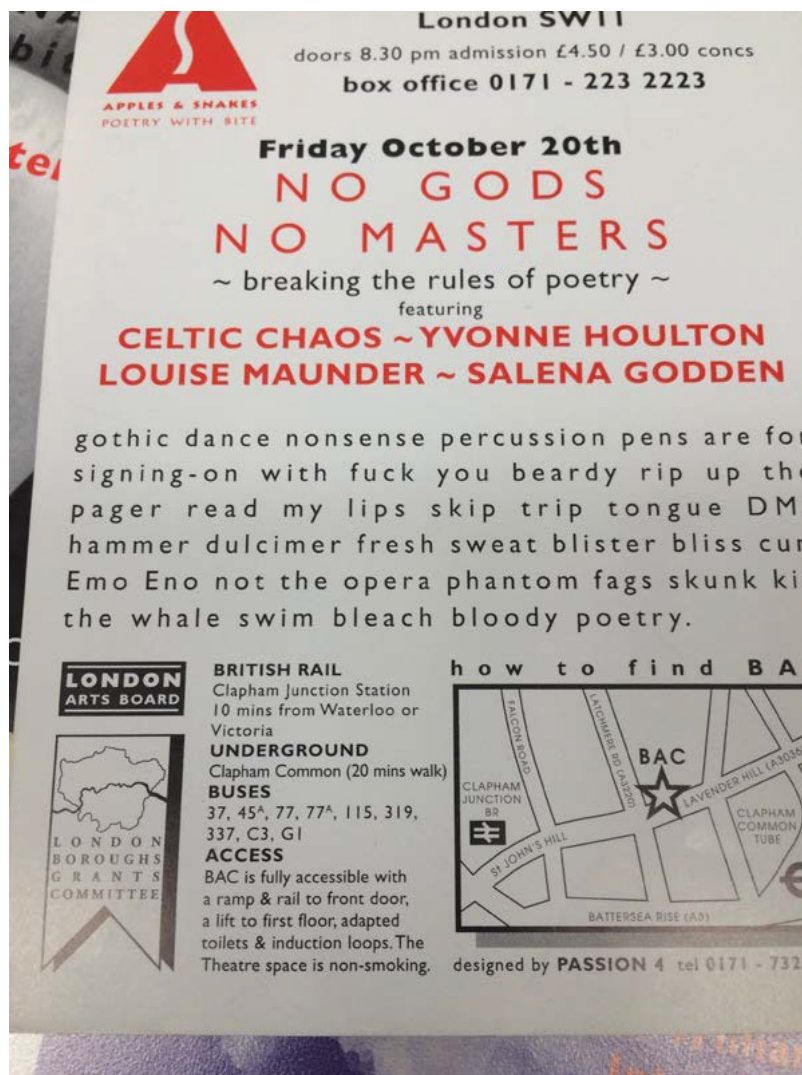


Figure 8. Apples and Snakes Flyer (1995)



Malika Booker was the Compere at many of the Apples and Snakes events in the nineties, when she worked with the organisation as their education coordinator. March 1996 sees her described at a BAC event 'sistas under the skin' as: 'Malika B: Africentric regality proclaiming reality Malika means Queen'.

This creativity in naming found in the early Apples and Snakes flyers is shared by many poets. Several of my interviewees describe their approaches to self-naming. The Manchester based poet Mark Mace Smith describes his work as 'thud dub' (Sound 1.1).

Sound 1.1 Mark Mace Smith interview



Salena Godden told me that when she started out she called herself: ‘Salena Saliva Gloopy Godiva God Bless Goddam Godden’ (interview). Godden also describes herself as ‘Jamish’: Jamaican, Irish and British (‘The Writer Outside’ 64). David J christened himself ‘vocal pugilist’, using a boxing metaphor to denote that he uses words and vocal techniques like ‘weapons’. In our interview he explains, ‘you rename yourself, you give yourself a name as it’s a name of transformation’. The poets I interviewed were uncomfortable with being labelled by others, especially when a label is used to prevent discussion. There is a difference between being labelled and the act of naming oneself. Self-naming is an active way of taking control over the language that is used to discuss the poet and their work.

1.3 Black British

In *Diversity, A Critical Engagement*, Nasheed Qamar Faruqi provides a dictionary of the ‘language that people who work in the cultural sectors, cultural professionals, in Britain use to talk about cultural, racial and ethnic difference’. Faruqi writes that language ‘emerges from its past, and will inevitably carry with it that baggage’ (7, 39). Language has ‘baggage’, and perhaps so does our bodies and our skin; Fred D’Aguiar, in his keynote speech at the Cultureword *7th Black and Asian Writers Conference* in Manchester said:

The black figure isn’t confined to time and space, you are able to get into a larger history and a larger hurt [...] something about skin and the nervous system allows you to know and feel things beyond the limitations of your body.

Likewise, my white skin contains a history in which, as Steve Martinot writes, ‘whites are the definers’, which means that “‘race” as a concept is inseparable from white supremacy’ and the ‘white hierarchical domination that constructs it’ (19). This history makes me uncomfortable with the position of ‘definer’. As a white person I cannot write about blackness, black Britishness or political Blackness from lived experience. This study focuses on individual poets and their poetry in performance rather than seeking to draw conclusions about Britishness, black Britishness, or questioning what might be a black British aesthetic, as Malika Booker did in her paper ‘Towards a Black British Poetic Aesthetic’ at the *Place for Poetry* conference at Goldsmiths University in 2015.

‘Black’ is the second entry in Faruqi’s dictionary of the ‘discourse of diversity’ (9). Faruqi describes the notion of ‘political and cultural blackness’ forged by ‘artists and activists – from W.E.B. Du Bois to bell hooks, Fanon to Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall’ (19). At several of the conferences I have attended the speakers and attendees regretted the loss of the inclusive and political use of ‘Black’. At the Cultureword *7th Black and Asian Writers Conference* in Manchester an attendee commented:

I regret when we ditched the inclusive world of Black [...] I don’t know when I had to decide where being ‘mixed race’ fits. When we said we are all Black writers that felt positive because it was a political term.

Kwame Dawes edited the anthology *Red, Contemporary Black British Poetry* in 2010. The anthology ‘sought to leave the defining of Black British up to the poets themselves – in other words, to the process of self-selection’ (19). Dawes comments that the term Black British is ‘an evolving one’ and that no one can ‘say categorically what it constitutes today’. He points to ‘Black British’ in the broad sense to mean anyone living in the British Isles ‘who is not Caucasian’ being at one end of a ‘spectrum’ and at the other, ‘British people of African descent’ which he says ‘can be quite limiting even as it has become increasingly articulated as the way to go’ (19). The recent anthology from Peepal Tree Press, *Filigree: Contemporary Black British Poetry*, uses the capitalised ‘Black British’ to refer to black and Asian poets (Wang 17). In his introduction to his poetry collection *Too Black, Too Strong*, Benjamin Zephaniah writes: ‘when I say ‘Black’ it means more than skin colour, I include Romany, Iraqi, Indians, Kurds, Palestinians, and all those that are treated Black by the united white states’ (13).

The poets I interviewed for the British Library do not sit uncomplicatedly within the ‘black British’ title of the archive. In our interview Indigo Williams comments she identifies as ‘black British’ as she has always lived in England, however, she feels between Nigerian and English cultures and describes herself as ‘culturally mixed race’. Kayo Chingonyi discusses being ‘ambivalent’ about the category ‘black British’ before joining the Complete Works scheme, but describes having now embraced the term because he has seen there is a need to emphasise that being black and being British are congruous. He suggests the notion that ‘you’ll either be British or black’ could be behind ‘the low number of black British poets published by prominent publishers’, and

that a lot of the black and Asian poets ‘tend to be people who are based elsewhere’ and are not seen as British. Chingonyi concludes that he will accept the label ‘so long as what I’m doing in accepting it is changing the notion of what Britishness is’ (interview).

Ria Jade Hartley, a British performance artist, points out that a ‘black British’ label ignores half of her heritage, ‘it’s important that I mark my heritage, I don’t disregard either side of my family’, at the same time she points out that there are problems with a notion of ‘mixedness’: ‘What does “mixed race” mean? What are we talking about in terms of race? [...] It’s not a homogeneous group’. In terms of ‘the experience of my own identity’ she sees herself as ‘politically “Black”’. We also discussed ‘British’ versus ‘English’, and that ‘black British’ has become a term in a way that ‘black English’ has not (interview). Although I have attended poetry events in Scotland and Wales and worked with Scottish, Welsh and Irish poets as part of my research, my case studies have always been based in England (moving between London, Birmingham, Hastings, Manchester and Wigan). Sissay is Ethiopian and grew up in Wigan, David J has Cuban grandparents, Jamaican parents, and grew up in South London and Salena Godden is Jamish, from Hastings. As Gemma Robinson comments, British postcolonial poetry ‘disavows shared identity or refuses recognition just as often as it demands them’ (110).

In this study I use ‘black’ in lower case to distinguish from the uppercase ‘politically Black’ outlined by Zephaniah. I use ‘black British’ when referring to British poets of African and Caribbean descent, and include dual/multiple heritage poets within this (where part of the heritage is African or Caribbean). Although my case studies are very different poets with contrasting influences, their work can be considered from a frame of reference within black semantics and practises such as Signifyin in a way that the work of Asian poets for instance could not. This is not to say that this is my definition of ‘black British’, but is a way of delimiting my research area for the purposes of this project. The label ‘black British’ serves a purpose that the poets I interviewed were happy with within the context of this research and the library archive. I occasionally use the term ‘of colour’ in the manner it is generally used today, as a wider term to encompass poets who do not identify as ‘white’.¹³ However, I am aware that it is a problematic term that can be seen to suggest that ‘white’ is the default rather than also a colour. I use the poet’s own words for themselves where possible (for instance

¹³ Nii Ayikwei Parkes uses the term ‘of colour’ in his editor’s introduction to *Filigree: Contemporary Black British Poetry* (25).

Godden's 'Jamish'). I conclude this exploration of naming and labelling with another quote from Furuqi, which I hope applies to this study too:

while there is some discomfort with the language explored here, there is also no doubt that it has on many occasions allowed conversations to take place that have not taken place by other terms. (39)

1.4 A psychophysical approach

The compound term 'psychophysical' was first used in reference to performance by the theatre director and actor trainer, Constantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski identified a need for a theory and practice of acting that would bridge the Cartesian split between "mind" and "body" and drew on yoga and psychology in his training methods (Zarrilli 8). The theatre director Phillip Zarrilli outlines his methods in *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski*. Like Stanislavski and others after him such as Jerzy Grotowski in Poland and the Odin Teatret in Denmark, Zarrilli draws on yoga to teach psychophysical principles of acting. Zarrilli also uses a South Indian martial art *kalarippayattu* to develop an acting methodology that makes use of imagery, breath and physical awareness. Zarrilli explains:

When psychology emerged as a separate discipline from philosophy in the nineteenth century, the sciences of mind and the self were often considered separate from the science(s) of the physical body. This split reflected the long-term Western binary dividing mind from body that so problematically crystallized in the mind-body dualism of the seventeenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Scientists and philosophers who wanted mind and body to be considered in relation to one another, rather than separately, began to use the compound term "psychophysical" to bridge this gap. (13)

The term 'psychophysical' summarises the fact that although the English language separates out 'mind' from 'body' and 'psychology' from 'physicality', in fact we do not experience ourselves as divided in this way. 'Psychophysical' is a compound word that illustrates the impossibility of separating out these aspects of our experience. The term is in my title as it is a foundational principle for this study. This study acknowledges that thinking is embodied, just as writing is, whether it occurs sitting on a chair or in a

live performance. One poet is no more ‘psychophysical’ in their writing and performing than any other. When discussing poetry in performance the term ‘psychophysical’ helps us to understand ‘writing’ as something that happens within the psychophysicality of the poet; the entire psychophysicality of the poet is engaged in writing.

Listening to poetry in performance is a psychophysical activity. Fred Cummins, working within cognitive science, researches choral speech. He wonders whether, if we consider alternatives to ‘the Cartesian mind/world split that divides ideas and meanings from sounds and movements’ the boundaries of what we consider to be “language” might ‘fragment’ (2). He suggests that replacing the singular, closed notion of ‘language’ with the idea of ‘languaging (rather than language) as a set of multifaceted behaviours that defy characterization from a single metaphysical viewpoint’ might allow us to talk about a fluid intertwining of subjectivities that occurs during choral, or joint speaking (2). Cummins notes that participants of a conversation:

become mutually linked in many subtle but observable ways. Eye movements (Richardson et al., 2007), postural sway (Schlockley et al., 2009), and even blinking (Cummins, 2012) have all been found to become subtly intertwined in conversation, leading to a dynamic entanglement of participants. (3)

It follows that audience members will be psychophysically engaged by a poetry performance. In a chapter on ‘Sounding Poetic Voice’ within *Voicing American Poetry* Lesley Wheeler asks: ‘What happens to our bodies when we listen to poetry read aloud?’ (25). She finds only ‘fragmentary answers’ within scientific research and does not return to the question elsewhere in her book, but does uncover some useful principles that are applicable to a discussion of poetry on the page and in performance. Wheeler notes that ‘there is some scientific evidence that even when we read silently, our bodies respond as if we are preparing to read aloud’, commenting that even ‘silent reading is a physical act’ (Ibid.). This supports the idea that although there are differences, both reading from the page silently, and listening to poetry are psychophysical activities.

In *The Transformative Power of Performance, a new aesthetics*, Erika Fischer-Lichte explores the phenomenon of the spectator’s psychophysical engagement without looking towards science. She uses the notion of a ‘*radical concept of presence*’ to

describe ‘the erasure of the opposition between body and mind/consciousness’, commenting that when a spectator senses the performer’s presence they ‘simultaneously bring themselves forth as embodied minds’ (99). She describes the connection between the performer and listener’s ‘bodily being-in-the-world’ (125). In “Salena Godden: Talk-singing, the Poet as Musician” I discuss how Godden’s use of her body and voice has meaning potential and connects her and her listener’s ‘bodily being-in-the-world’ (Ibid.).

The Jamaican poet Jean “Binta” Breeze describes performing poetry as ‘seducing the air’ (‘A Round-Table Discussion’ 40). When I am fully engaged by a poetry performance my breath changes, my sense of my own body shifts, I might hold tension in my diaphragm, I might lean forward, I might see images in my imagination... and this happens when the poet moves the air with their words. Poetry in performance is a psychophysical form of live writing that sculpts with sound, language and imagery in the space between the bodies of the audience and the body of the poet, and changes the way we breathe.

1.5 Live Writing

In our interview Kayo Chingonyi talks about his frustrations with ‘the whole situation of dualism’ and the ways of thinking about poetry that make a division between the ‘bodily’ performance and ‘cerebral’ page:

there’s a kind of looking down on things which are bodily which are about movement, which are about performance, because performance connects us too much to having bodies. Then poetry is seen as this kind of cerebral thing, which is about thinking and being intelligent and dancing that intellect on the page.

The term ‘live writing’ challenges the notion that writing is an unembodied ‘cerebral’ activity. A poet writing on the page is in their body as much as in their brain. A poet writing in performance is ‘thinking and being intelligent and dancing that intellect’ *in the air*. My British Library interviews reveal that the voice and the body are as much a part of ‘writing’ as writing is a part of performing. They reveal that although some might see writing poetry on the page as a ‘cerebral thing’, this is not how many poets experience writing. In our interviews both Malika Booker and Anthony Joseph revealed

that all aspects of their writing processes are psychophysical. Joseph talked about being able to access language in a different way through vocalising whilst writing:

In reading the poem [out loud], you access a bigger pool of language, you access the collective language and the words suggest themselves to you. Writing it on the page is a very insular process, you generate words in your vocabulary and your space, but speaking it, reading it somehow connects you to other musical ideas.

Vocalisation is a way of embodying writing, engaging not just the ears in listening, but the breath, diaphragm, larynx, and vocal folds. Malika Booker comments that she likes to walk whilst she writes: ‘because I need to get the rhythm, I need to hear things I need to feel things [...] writing is not just a solitary sitting down act’. Booker writes on her feet both at the early compositional stage, and in performance. In our interview she describes how her poem ‘My Mother’s Blues’ was written through performance in response to her live audience. Her description provides an example of ‘live writing’ and also illustrates the interactive joys of a poetry night.¹⁴

My Mother’s Blues

My mother knows pain
a sorrowful gospel type of pain –

a slowly losing her eyesight,
eye-drops every night pain,

a headache worrying for her children overseas,
praying for their safety pain,

a stare through each night, eyes blackening,
hope they are alright pain.

Yes, my mother knows pain.

My children don’t call,
do they still love me pain,

a will my daughter ever have children,
she is thirty-eight now pain,

¹⁴ I have seen Booker perform the poem on two occasions, the first at a formal performance as part of a conference panel at *The Place for Poetry* conference at Goldsmiths University in 2015, and the second at an event I programmed for the Cheltenham Literature Festival in 2015. I was one of four researchers selected by the AHRC to curate an event at the Cheltenham Literature Festival. I programmed ‘What do we mean by Poetry’, a performance and discussion with Malika Booker and Mark Mace Smith.

a *your womb is becoming stone* sermon
for her only girl on her birthday pain.

Yes, my mother knows pain.

A what did I do wrong
bringing them up pain,

a my son has gone astray, someone put obeah on him
so I have to pray real hard pain,

a look how so-and-so children do so well,
I wish mine were like that pain.

Yes my mother knows pain.

It's the house now empty
no one to cook for pain,

and I can't let go, have to let go pain,
it's a let me tell you how to bury me pain,

I want a plain box, no fancy coffin,
or I will come back and haunt you pain,

a don't have no big set of people
coming around calling it a wake pain,

it's a let me tell you who will get what
after I am gone, so you don't fight pain,

it's a don't worry I go soon be dead and gone
and then you go miss me pain.

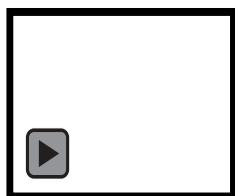
Yes my mother feels pain.
(*Pepper Seed* 79-80)

In our interview Booker describes how when she started reading the poem she would pause before the word 'pain', 'I think because it was new to me'. This first time she performed the poem her audience 'seemed to know and understood the pauses' and they started to join in with Booker on the word 'pain'. She was still 'trying to figure out how to read the poem live', and the audience joined in 'so half way through I was like "I need to start again, you guys are like... you guys are on it..."' The second time she performed it she told her audience: 'there's a point where you say "pain" – but they [the audience] didn't know when the "pain" was coming'. Booker describes treating 'the performance space as a laboratory'. She realised she needed to put her hand up to

indicate to her audience that ‘pain’ was coming. Her description reveals the conscious way in which she uses gesture in performance. She became aware that her general gesturing was confusing the audience and she had to limit her gestures to her conducting of the choral ‘pain’:

The first time was right because it was an accident, and then by about the fifth time we’d worked it out, because sometimes my hand would go – to be my mother in the poem *look how so and so...* I put my hand up and everyone’s like ‘pain’ ‘pain’ ‘pain’, so that was worked out on the spot.

Sound 1.2 Malika Booker interview



Booker describes how she struggled with writing ‘My Mother’s Blues’ on the page, that she wasn’t ‘sure how to use the “pain”’. She wrote ‘twenty-six drafts, trying to figure it out’ (Sound 1.2). It was only when she did it for an audience that she realised the poem was ‘important’. She describes how, in ‘conversation with the audience’ the way to use the word ‘pain’ and the collectivity of that experience was revealed to her through the ‘call and response’ form. She uses the plural ‘we’ to describe the process, (‘we’d worked it out’), demonstrating how the audience collaborated with her in the live writing of the poem, as she says, ‘the live space can be a laboratory’. Booker emphasises that there is a difference in writing for the page and writing for performance. Booker’s description of ‘My Mother’s Blues’ provides an ‘example of the difference between page and stage, but also the different crafts involved’ (interview).

This difference is not the difference Chingonyi describes being frustrated by; it is not a difference between a cerebral notion of writing and embodied performance. However, writing alone and writing live in front of an audience enable the poet to write in different ways. Booker points out that ‘sometimes a [printed] poem can be script’, you add things, or pull things out in response to the ‘live readership’ of the audience, when ‘something is happening’ and you respond to the ‘energy in the air’ to ‘bring it alive’. After hearing a poem in performance an audience member might buy the book and

point out ‘that’s not the same poem’. This is the principle put forward by Charles Bernstein in his introduction to *Close Listening* (9). Performed and printed versions of poems are often different to each other, and require a different kind of poetic craft. As Booker’s narrative reveals, both versions are equally ‘written’: her performed version requires writing with gesture, voice and in response to her audience; her page version required finding the right form for the page and a single reader. Booker reveals how every element of performance, from the language, pauses, use of gesture and interaction with her audience, are all part of live writing.

When editing the poem on the page, Kwame Dawes (of Peepal Tree Press) saw the word ‘pain’ as the voice of Booker’s mother, a singular voice, he told Booker “this is an important poem man, it needs to go at the end of the book, with your mother having the last word” (qtd. Booker, interview). In performance the poem becomes about each audience member’s mother. At the conference in Goldsmiths University the celebration of the mothers’ collective ‘pain’ was palpable. The audience at the Cheltenham Literary Festival were quieter, but they joined in too; there are mothers like Booker’s everywhere. By adding our individual voices to a chorus we do not conjure up an abstract mother, or simply add volume to the notion of Booker’s mother. We bring many mothers into the space. Perhaps some audience members join in as mothers and grandmothers themselves, but I suspect that most are thinking of their own. The audience conjures a collective of imagined, remembered, mourned and celebrated mothers. The remembrance of mothers’ ‘pain’ is affectionate and humorous, we share our enjoyment of our mothers, and of all the ‘pain’ we put them through, together. In performance, Booker’s mother does not have the last word, we do.

1.6 Live Writing and the Avant-garde

Within British poetry the term ‘avant-garde’ usually refers to a group of (white, mostly male) poets with a particular history with the Poetry Society in the seventies (as documented by Peter Barry in *Poetry Wars, British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court*), a history of ignoring poets of colour (as a flick through the index of Barry’s study confirms) and connections with an American academic avant-garde (also mostly white and male, the best known figures being Charles Bernstein, who founded LANGUAGE poetry and Kenneth Goldsmith, known for his ‘uncreative writing’). Avant-garde poetics are usually focused around ‘alternative poetics based on extra-

semantic properties such as visuality and sound' and texts that question 'the nature and possibility of a non problematic speaking subject' (Ramey, 'Diaspora and the Avant-Garde' 190). In *Voicing American Poetry, sound and performance from the 1920s to the present*, Wheeler provides a detailed account of twentieth century American poetry in performance, mapping 'avant-garde', 'academic' and 'slam' poetry. Wheeler comments that 'it remains true that the pioneers of this new work on sound culture and poetry performance are often poet-scholars who identify strongly with various avant-gardes' (22).

Wheeler points to Charles Bernstein as a key figure within this American avant-garde scholarship. Bernstein's introduction to *Close Listening* is often referenced by critics writing about poetry performance, and provides a useful overview of the subject. Bernstein summarises debates around the relationship of sound to meaning, sound symbolism and iconicity. He explores questions of notation, and asks whether extra-linguistic material might be considered a part of the poetry performance or 'audiotext'. Bernstein suggests that a poetry reading shifts the emphasis from 'writer' to 'writing', making the poem, rather than the poet present:

The poetry reading enacts the poem not the poet; it materializes the text not the author; it performs the work, not the one who composed it. In short, the significant fact of the poetry reading is less the presence of the poet than the presence of the poem. (13)

Bernstein's thoughts chime with those of Caroline Bergvall, an avant-garde poet who used the term 'live writing' in her keynote speech 'What do we mean by Performance Writing?' at Dartington College of Arts in 1996. The keynote opened up questions of what Performance Writing might be during a conference programmed around the new degree course 'Performance Writing' at the college. Bergvall highlights the importance of 'the materiality of writing', speaking of 'writerly work which extends beyond the page' (3). She focuses on 'writing' rather than a 'writer' and asks 'is it writing that performs not writes' (1). She casts writing as 'another performer' that might be 'addressed explicitly' (6). It is this sense that writing is something independent, something that might be 'activated for and through [...] a performer's body, the body of a voice or the body of a page' that informs her (cautious) introduction of the term 'live writing':

can one turn the hour-glass and argue for the specificities of a live writing (I use the term with caution) where the performer's presence is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing. (6)

This description of 'writing' making itself present in place of the 'writer' is very similar to Bernstein's suggestion that a poetry reading 'enacts the poem not the poet' (13). It suggests that rather than focusing on the writer, as I did in my earlier description of Malika Booker's experience of performing 'My Mother's Blues', I could have shifted my focus to the poem, somehow making itself present, and *writing itself*. Both Bergvall and Bernstein conceptualise the poetry reading as something detached from physical authorial presence. Bergvall discusses 'the performance of writing itself' (5); Bernstein posits that it is the text that is materialised 'not the author' (13). Both echo Roland Barthes who, in 'Death of the Author', wrote:

it is language that speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'. (142)

These ways of thinking about writing suggest that in performance the writing itself lives, taking the place of the ('dead') author. Jacques Derrida explores the mistrust of authorial presence behind the presencing of 'writing' rather than 'writer' in his writings on phonocentrism:

We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence. (12)

If the author is a stable presence, and can be turned to (even historically) for definitive answers about the meanings of their work then this closes down the notions of *différance* and dissemination of meaning that Derrida's writings open, in which meaning itself can never be present, and neither can the author. Bergvall suggests that even when the body of the writer is on stage it is the writing that is 'present' rather than

the writer. The shift of emphasis involved in this conceptual approach makes the performance of poetry compatible with poststructuralism, but does it exclude the (present) voice, body and ‘identity’ of the writer? How *does* a writer make their writing present in their place?

Charles Bernstein and the poet John Hall (once a colleague of Caroline Bergvall’s in the Performance Writing department at Dartington) both contrast their interest in a ‘minimal performance mode’ – a mode that enables the text to be materialised rather than the author – with a ‘theatrical’ mode. Bernstein writes:

Without in any way wishing to undermine the more extravagantly theatrical style of reading, I would point to this more monovalent, minimally inflected, and in any case unaugmented, mode as touching on the essence of the medium. (11)

Marit MacArthur uses pitch analysis software to identify the properties of the mode of delivery that Bernstein and Hall describe as ‘monovalent’ and as a ‘minimal performance mode’. She describes the mode as ‘monotonous incantation’ (‘Monotonous’). In an interview for my blog, John Hall told me: ‘I would distrust myself if I was in any way theatricalising the text, if I were bringing the elements of theatre to it. Poems are not theatre, on the whole’. Like Bernstein, Hall suggests that there is a point when a poetry performance crosses over into theatre and loses the ‘essence’ of poetry. As Denise Riley comments: ‘The strange convention of the poetry reading ushers in the theatrical self with a vengeance’ (80). During our discussion around how poetry in performance is perceived within British poetry as a whole, the poet Kayo Chingonyi comments that there is a mistrust of any kind of performance that is seen as being about ‘show’, and ‘artifice’ and ‘likened to “theatre” or “acting”’. What is the difference between *acting* a poem and enabling it to somehow *write itself*? Bernstein and Hall seem to be saying that poets who do not perform in a ‘minimal performance mode’ (but are poets and not actors) cross over into the context of theatre and lose the ‘essence’ of poetry.

In spite of his emphasis on the ‘monovalent’, Bernstein’s own readings often vary in dynamic and intonation, highlighting the syntactic jumps in his writing, in a way that *could* be described as ‘theatrical’, and that in fact would not fit the parameters of ‘monotonous incantation’ defined by MacArthur (who also cites Bernstein’s preference

for the mode) (40). The Youtube video of ‘Last Words of Sentences my Father Used’, shows Bernstein creating a new text in performance, a text that, at the time of performing was not yet published. At minute 26:15 we can observe his ‘theatrical’ use of dynamic and pitch (the word ‘straps’ is much louder); he does not demonstrate a narrow range of intonation, but uses his delivery to further disrupt possible interpretations of the poem and to foreground the materiality of the voice above syntax and semantics (‘Watch (and listen!’). It might be argued that these dynamic shifts are not ‘theatrical’ because they disrupt rather than emphasise semantic meaning.

Raymond Williams, in his volume *Keywords*, defines the term ‘theatrical’ and dates it from the nineteenth century: ‘*Theatrical*, to describe a certain exaggerated quality in some action’ – a term he notes that can be ‘unkind but perhaps necessary’ (110). ‘Theatrical’ (much like ‘performance poetry’) has gained negative connotations and has therefore become a difficult word to define. The fact that Bergvall, Bernstein and Hall make choices in performance, even when these choices are intended to ‘minimise’ their own presence and reduce the ‘theatricality’ of their delivery suggests that they engage in ‘live writing’ just as much as a poet such as Lemn Sissay, who exaggerates his use of voice and body, and amplifies his own ‘presence’. As Sissay points out in our interview:

The poet who reads in a monotone voice, who doesn’t want to gesticulate, who consciously decides to *anti-perform*, is actually performing him or herself, is acknowledging the stage, acknowledging the projection of the poem and making a performative decision.

Is Bergvall’s notion of ‘live writing’ compatible with mine? Is poststructuralist thinking compatible with a discussion of poetry in performance? The few critics who have written in depth about poetry in performance have responded to the question of authorial presence within poststructuralism by dismissing such philosophies entirely. Julia Novak states:

Like the New Critics, Barthes – and deconstruction in general – has firmly laid the focus on writing as the one true medium of literature. Barthes’s principles of criticism do not simply devalue live poetry as an insignificant literary practice – they extinguish the very possibility of oral performance as an alternative to the written word. (26)

Novak identifies Barthes' discussion of authorship as particularly incompatible with poetry in performance. Barthes' short essay 'Death of the Author' is concerned with moving away from biographical interpretations of literature and singular meaning, placing the role of interpretation on the reader rather than the author: 'To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (147). Barthes predominantly makes the point that shifting emphasis from author to reader acknowledges that the reader plays a part in the production of meanings. It is challenging to see how we can talk about the physicality and voice of a poet without acknowledging them as the author, but perhaps it is possible to talk about the poet, their body, presence and voice without imposing 'a final signified' on the writing.

The postmodern displacement of authorship from 'author' to 'reader' presents, as Fenton Keane puts it, a 'contradiction' when it comes to the signification of the body within the poetry reading, and is particularly problematic when applied outside of a white Western, predominantly male canon. Academics including Lauri Ramey, Victoria Arana, Cathy Park Hong, Sandeep Parmar and Romana Huk have commented that white privilege is embedded in this conceptual absencing of the body and 'presence' of the poet from literary history. Romana Huk states that postmodernist theory is 'a largely white western phenomenon' (31) and asks how the avant-garde of poetry is compatible with those poets with literary heritages that:

are not part of that continuous western cultural imaginary and its post-modern deconstruction, and whose places exist neither on their own outside it nor happily hyphenated within it? (24)

Cathy Park Hong simply describes the history of avant-garde poetry as 'a racist tradition'. In 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde' she writes:

The avant-garde's "delusion of whiteness" is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be "post-identity" and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are.

The poet David Marriott suggests that avant-garde white poets are able to minimise their own conceptual presence in performance because their literal presence is already inscribed into a literary tradition; their identity has historically been the default identity for a Western poet: ‘The avant-garde poet emerges as a figure (invariably male, invariably white) that history and culture no longer need to put in question’ (‘Response to Race’). Marriott’s article was one of a series commissioned by Stefania Heim on ‘Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde’ for *The Boston Review*. Heim invited contributors to reflect on the ‘current status’ of the following statement, made by Harryette Mullen in 1996: ‘The assumption remains, however unexamined, that ‘avant-garde’ poetry is not ‘black’ and that ‘black’ poetry, however singular its ‘voice,’ is not ‘formally innovative’ (11). Cathy Park Hong writes:

the avant-garde’s most vocal, self-aggrandizing stars continue to be white and even today these stars like Kenneth Goldsmith spout the expired snake oil that poetry should be “against expression” and “post-identity”.¹⁵

At a conference in 2016, *Race, poetry and poetics in the UK*, I commented on the non-performance mode and anti-theatrical aesthetic popular in the avant-garde, suggesting that a reason the avant-garde has not embraced black poet-performers could be to do to the perceived slickness of their performance technique. Peter Middleton and Robert Hampson were keen to point out that I must be referring to the Cambridge avant-garde poets, not the London poets, who were more focused on performance. The sound poet Bob Cobbing ran the ‘Writers’ Forum’ in London in the eighties and nineties. This was a central meeting place for the avant-garde London poets and visiting international poets working in similar traditions. Robert Sheppard remembers the forum in *Jacket* magazine. He lists the poets who attended 1993-95. This list of thirty-nine writers (including Sheppard) includes only nine women. With the caveat that it is often inaccurate to make assumptions about racial heritage based on appearance, the list appears to be entirely white, save (presumably) one writer, the only one not given a name but described as ‘an African woman with children’s stories’. This absence of black writers from the avant-garde is a literal absence rather than the conceptualised

¹⁵ At Brown University in 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith (figurehead of the American avant-garde and proponent of ‘uncreative writing’) used Michael Brown’s autopsy report in a reading entitled ‘The Body of Michael Brown’. Writing from the avant-garde ‘post-identity’ position, he was seemingly unaware of how his own white, living body became violently present, highlighting the absence of the black man whose dead body he described.

absenting of authorial presence discussed above. However, as David Marriott points out in his article, the two ways of staging absence are connected. To negate one's own presence and allow the 'writing itself' to perform is a privilege that can be entertained more easily by writers whose actual authorial presence, and names, will not be forgotten.

Poets of colour and performers who do not write in line with the avant-garde's 'post-identity' aesthetics are often dismissed with the criticism that they engage in 'fixed-identity politics'. Sandeep Parmar writes that the 'fixed identity politics' often found in performance poetry by black poets such as Benjamin Zephaniah and Grace Nichols were a 'political necessity' in response to 'a largely white tradition' ('Not a British Subject'). This tradition is one in which whiteness is assumed unless the poet explicitly states otherwise, thereby making their self and their identity the subject of their poem. Of course our identities are never 'fixed', but the term 'fixed identity' has emerged to describe poems in which the identity of the poet is foregrounded. An example is Dean Atta's poem, 'Young, Black and Gay', which, as its title states, makes its impact by stating an identity that has often been excluded. In our interview Atta comments that the poem 'caught people's imagination' as 'being openly gay and proud of that is still seen as some kind of achievement or bravery'. He comments that the poem was shared and discussed so often as it has provided 'an access point to talk about race'. He recounts that during his MA at Goldsmiths University one of his tutors pointed out 'your only access point is the I'. Atta responded that this was true, asking 'is it a problem?' The phrase 'fixed identity' is rarely used as a simple descriptor, it is often a critical description, positioned at the opposite pole from the avant-garde's poststructural notions of 'post-identity' and attempts to absent their own author-ity even when stood on stage performing, or 'monotonously incanting' their poems ('Monotonous'). Cathy Park Hong explores what she describes as the 'bogeyman of a moniker':

To be an identity politics poet is to be anti-intellectual, without literary merit, no complexity, sentimental, manufactured, feminine, niche-focused, woefully out-of-date and therefore woefully unhip, politically light, and deadliest of all, used as bait by market forces' calculated branding of boutique liberalism.

It is a far more loaded term than an equivalent descriptor 'confessional', which tends to be used for white poets who write first person narratives about their experiences. In our

interview, the poet Inua Ellams comments that ‘identity’ poems often don’t get past the proclaiming of identity stage into ‘why I am or why I need to say I am’. He points out that ‘fixed identity’ poems are a product of poets who are still ‘fighting to be recognised’, suggesting that ‘the more the establishment creates space for those voices, the more the voices would widen their reach’.

In July 2014 the Mouthy Poets staged a high profile event ‘Say Sum Thin 7’ at the Nottingham Playhouse headlined by John Agard. The young poets in the group compered the evening and performed their own material before the headline act. Throughout the evening the dominant narrative was one of ‘sharing your story’ ‘telling the truth’ ‘telling it how it is’ – approaches to poetry that encourage ‘identity poems’. The diverse ensemble spoke of their experiences of racism, of home, of questions of belonging, and of what Britishness might be. The audience were encouraged by the comperes to ‘click’ if something resonated. The prompt to ‘click’ encourages poets to write poems that are structured as a series of statements that resonate immediately, rather than to write poems that only ‘click’ with the listener at the end, or days later, or perhaps not at all. Platforms such as Youtube and Instagram are perfectly designed for poems in the form of statements and aphorisms. The ‘likes’ that are aimed for on social media are the equivalent to the ‘clicks’ attained in performance. As the descriptions of the ‘20 Poets You Need to Follow on Instagram’ in *Cosmopolitan* demonstrate, to get a ‘like’, a poem needs to be easily and quickly ‘#Relatable’ (Adil).

In my interview with Trinidadian poet Anthony Joseph, we discuss why there are so few black British avant-garde poets. Joseph comments that a Caribbean poet doesn’t notice his/her own blackness, ‘it would be like a fish noticing water’, whereas a poet who grows up in a country in which they experience racism and are constantly reminded of their own skin colour is more likely to write poems that discuss these experiences and assert their identity rather than be preoccupied with the materiality of language and the decentring of identity found in avant-garde poetics. Cornelia Gräbner writes: ‘The performer’s presence highlights the importance of the cultural, social, political, and historical elements of his background, and the traditions that inform his work’ (*Off the page* 72). As soon as a body on stage utters ‘I’, they are seen to align their identity with their words. When this is an identity previously absented this *making present* becomes a political as well as a poetic act. Chingonyi writes that poets of colour

‘face a double bind’, that they either:

imitate the – predominantly white – canonical writers of the literary establishment, doing a violence to a part of themselves, or they write into or through their heritage and encourage a critical reading that privileges their identity. (‘Worrying the [blood]line’)

Alongside this ‘double bind’, Chingonyi describes finding himself caught between ‘two worlds’ of poetry. Influenced by hip hop lyricism, he performs in the ‘performance poetry’ world which privileges the spoken word. His university tutor told him ‘the poem’s truest form was the printed page rather than the speaking voice’. Although Chingonyi finds commonalities between the hip hop lyricism of Nas and the lyricism of Douglas Dunn, outside of ‘performance poetry’ he has found that: ‘standards of taste hinged on the fact of these two worlds remaining separate’. Chingonyi describes writing poems out of these frustrations, poems that could be described as ‘fixed identity poems’:

There are folders in an attic somewhere overflowing with angry and defensive poems in which I entreat the reader to allow me to be more than their image of me. With a few exceptions, I cannot help thinking of these poems as failures. Not only because the writing was mawkish but also because much of this writing reaffirms what it seeks to combat. In these poems my identity, and in particular my otherness, is foregrounded in a manner that makes the matter of my identity the main propositional content of the poem. Moreover, such an approach centres whiteness as the norm even as it seems to challenge that notion. The main thing the poems have to say is ‘I am complex’. At the same time, saying it was an important thing because I felt like an interloper when I tried to access certain literary spaces. (Ibid.)

Chingonyi’s observations reveal the complexities around the notion of ‘fixed identity’ poetry. These poems were necessary for him to write, to challenge the spaces that made him feel ‘like an interloper’. They are in some ways a product of the racism and tribalism of British poetry. At the same time, Chingonyi is unsatisfied by how his identity became the ‘main propositional content of the poem’ and how foregrounding his identity ‘centres whiteness as the norm even as it seems to challenge that notion’. Chingonyi points out that it is impossible to be ‘unaware that the author is black’ when

their body and voice are physically present on stage:

This [avant-garde] kind of self-effacement is not really an option for poets of colour in the post-social media world where author photos, biographies, and video recordings are a part of identifying as a poet. It has never been easier for readers to read a poet's race into a poem. ('Worrying the [blood]line')

Is there a connection between the visible body of the poet and the criticism of 'identity politics'? The black body of the writer emerged as an unofficial theme running through numerous panel discussions at the 2016 National Black Writers Conference in Brooklyn. Speaking on a panel on poetry and spoken word, the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat referred to 'recent emphasis on the body' within discourse in the United States. She comments: 'we thought it [the body] was the last place we could control' but the growing police violence and racism has meant: 'our bodies are vulnerable in church, on the bus, on the street'. Michael Eric Dyson, in his keynote speech (part poetry performance, part rap, part sermon) talked about the black body being a 'proxy' for the suppressed racist violence against Obama – racism that he did not address: 'he refused to speak and now the vultures descend and feed on body politick'. On a panel on the politics of race and gender, Althea Tait referred to male poets experimenting with video and voice to express pain, she described their work as 'site specific', specific to the body in performance, describing 'marginalised bodies' as 'punching bags', as 'the place of real trauma'. Within racist societies, the presence (and absence) of a black body on stage is already political. Identity politics are inscribed into society and the body cannot be taken for granted and cannot be absented, it is part of the poet's *writing*.

Rather than shutting down possible interpretations, the poet's presence contributes to the multiple meanings that are written live in performance. Is there a way of continuing the thinking of Bergvall and Bernstein, in terms of exploring the notion that 'writing' might make itself present, whilst acknowledging that one of the strands that is being performed by the 'writing' *is* the author? Poststructuralist thinking invites an expansion of the notion of 'writing' in ways that relate to my use of 'live writing'. Although it is true (as Cavarero points out in her appendix) that Derrida does not discuss the individual voice in relation to literature, he did not consider writing [on the page] 'as the one true medium of literature' as Novak suggests (26). In fact his notion of *writing* is an

expanded one, which might include the inscription of words in space:

And thus we say ‘writing’ for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural ‘writing’. (Derrida 9)

Thinking about ‘writing’ as ‘inscription in general’ sounds close to my understanding of ‘live writing’. Although Derrida does not suggest that the voice might be a vehicle for writing ‘in space’, his use of ‘even if’ suggests it is not necessarily excluded. Perhaps this expanded notion might enable us to consider as *writing*, poems that are inscribed into the air with the voice, the way Jean “Binta” Breeze describes it, ‘seducing the air’ (‘A Round-Table Discussion’ 40). When Bergvall discusses Performance Writing (of which her exploration of live writing is a part), she too seems to view writing as ‘inscription in general’, in which the terms ‘writing’ and ‘performance’ are expanded:

could one not argue that there is more, not less, to writing than the page, more, not less, to writing than language, more, not less, to text treatment than syntactical or morphological experimentation. And that to engage with writing in such extensive material terms, both as writers and readers, is what inscribes the performance of writing. (5)

Roland Barthes expands ‘writing’ with his notion of ‘vocal writing’. Although for Barthes (as with so much of his work) this is conceptual, part of an ‘aesthetic of textual pleasure’ rather than something that actually exists, in *The Pleasure of the Text* he opens a discussion of the phenomena ‘as though it existed’ (66). Barthes’ expanded notion of writing is something that is achieved through a particular kind of vocal quality. He offers an evocative, almost erotic description of the voice, which, in ‘writing aloud’ aims, not for the clarification of meaning but:

pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language [...] it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss. (66-67)

Although Barthes stopped writing about theatre after 1960, evocations of the voice and the body run through his essays. Barthes' sensual language can be harnessed when discussing the voice of the poet in performance, and when approaching the body and the voice as a part of live writing, part of the text, or 'tissue' of performance. Likewise, although Bernstein's conceptualising of the absence of the poet in a poetry reading might prompt him to ignore the body and voice of the poet, his introductory essay in *Close Listening* refers to the 'carnality of language' using the term 'animalady' and telling us that 'sound is language's flesh' (22). Bernstein writes, 'meaning is not something that accompanies the words but is performed by them' (21). This chimes with the principle stated by Kamau Brathwaite, and key to this study, that the noise of a poem is a part of its meaning (271).

Although the notion that writing can be made present rather than the writer seems to exclude the body, voice and identity of the poet, Bernstein and Bergvall, and even Derrida's discussions of writing also open up the notion of writing as something that can happen out loud, something that is embodied, something that is about noise, the materiality of language, the 'animalady' of language's flesh. I see Bernstein's discussion of sound, Brathwaite's discussion of noise, and Bergvall's discussion of writing that happens in performance as compatible prompts that start to provide a vocabulary with which to discuss poetry in performance, and also, *poets* in performance. The sensuality, or 'animalady' of the approach to the voice touched on by Barthes and Bernstein relates to my discussion of the textures and meanings of the voice in the performances of Salena Godden and David J. The discussion around presence and identity can be considered in relation to Lemn Sissay's undermining and defamiliarising of his status and identities in performance. Although I argue that the poet *writes* live with their body and presence, the notion that *writing* can make *itself* present encourages the idea that is contained within my use of the term 'live writing' – that 'writing' is understood as an active verb in the present continuous, something that happens live in performance.

This study starts from the poet's performance and develops a critical language, methodology and approaches to listening based on the work itself. There is more that can be said about the terms used in my title; they will continue to gain meanings throughout the following chapters. In my introduction I state that the analysis of poetry

performance consists of three interconnected activities: listening, notating and analysing. The next chapter explores ways of listening, what notation can reveal about listening, and how the analysis of poetry in performance can be distorted by the ways in which we listen to and notate poetry.

Chapter two

Ways of Listening

'*Hearing* is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act' (Barthes 'Listening' 245).

2.1 Silent Voices

In *Theatre and Audience*, Helen Freshwater describes audiences as made up of individuals who bring with them 'cultural reference points, political beliefs, sexual preferences, personal histories and immediate preoccupations to the interpretation of a production' (6). We experience a poem differently to our neighbours because no two people are the same. Some might have a visual landscape painted in their mind's eye as they listen, others may focus just on sound. Sometimes I re-play a line silently in my head with different intonation in order to clarify meanings, or to savour it. When listening to a familiar poem in performance we might measure it up to the version we have already 'heard' in our imaginations, or to a previous performance. Perhaps we have read the page version so many times that the poet's reading interferes with the way we 'heard' it. Or, a reading might clarify or change our experience of a familiar poem. We might hear a poem in our heads when reading on the page in our own silent voice, or perhaps, if we have heard the poet perform, we might hear their voice as we read silently. Even a silent voice can be experienced as something that is 'heard'. Thomas Lux explores the voice that can be heard in our heads in his poem 'The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently':

is not silent, it is a speaking-
out-loud voice in your head: it is *spoken*,
a voice is *saying* it
as you read. It's the writer's words,
of course, in a literary sense
his or her *voice*, but the sound
of that voice is the sound of your voice.

[...]
[...] It is your voice
saying, for example, the word barn
that the writer wrote
but the barn you say
is a barn you know or knew. The voice

in your head, speaking as you read,
never says anything neutrally – some people
hate the barn they knew,
some people love the barn they know... (15)

Lux describes the ‘voice in your head’ as a kind of ‘sound’ that is heard whilst reading silently. As Lux describes, this silent voice, ‘never says anything neutrally’. As well as our own silent voice, we ‘hear’ our thoughts, associations and responses as we read, none of which is ‘neutral’. The inner voice and narratives of the reader, and the audience member, are a world that the analyser of a poetry performance has no access to. When talking about poetry, the silent, imagined or metaphorical voice is often referenced, as Lux writes, ‘in a literary sense’. We talk about poets finding their ‘voice’ and mean finding their own way of writing. Lesley Wheeler points out that ‘voice’ is often ‘a metaphor for originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence within printed poetry’ (3).

Critics often talk about ‘sound’ when analysing a poem from the page and rely on the reader’s ability to imaginatively ‘hear’. Wheeler comments that although there is little research in this area, even silent reading can engage our bodies and brains, ‘as if the brain is priming to speak’. The voice that speaks in our inner ear as we read can activate us psychophysically, engaging our bodies as well as our imaginations. Wheeler concludes:

poetry’s strategies of sound saturation, and the very expectations of sound saturation we bring to poetry, may intensify how the silent reading of poetry involves our bodies (25)

We talk about hearing poetry in our mind’s ear, and often use ‘voice’ as a metaphor for originality rather than in reference to the actual heard voice. Discourse of listening and voicing is found throughout poetry analysis, even when no actual heard voice is referred to at all. Julia Novak confirms Lux’s point when she comments on the idea:

that sound, as a quality inherent to the written word, can be found on the page, and thus can be analysed as the sound caught by “the mind’s ear” in a silent reading rather than any actual sound produced in a recital. (52-53)

As Novak points out, the analysis of poetry is full of conceptual and imagined ‘voice’ and ‘listening’, but there is very little discussion of actual heard instances of voice, and of the ways in which we listen to poetry. If Brathwaite is right, and the noise of a poem is part of its meaning, what more can we discover about a poem by actually listening to it?

2.2 Listening to what?

When analysing a poem in performance should we listen to accidental sounds? Charles Bernstein thinks so:

these irruptions may be highly artful, they may also fall into the body’s rhythms – gasps, stutters, hiccups, burps, coughs, slurs, microrepetitions, oscillations in volume, “incorrect” pronunciations, and so on – that is, if you take these elements to be semantic features of the performed poem, as I propose, and not as extraneous interruption. (13-14)

As Bernstein comments, these ‘irruptions’ impact our experience of the poem in performance, but I suggest that an accidental cough should be analysed differently to an intentional shift in voice; an absent-minded head scratch should be accorded a different weight in analysis to an intentional gesture. I suggest that when analysing a poetry performance, accidental sounds should be considered, not as part of the live writing but nevertheless as part of the experience of the poem. How can we distinguish between intentional and unintentional sound, between intentional and accidental modes of performance?

Julia Novak describes the Irish poet Aoife Mannix’s vocal timbre (during her performance of her poem ‘Marked’) as “metallic” or “sharp,” going straight to the bone’. She concludes that her ‘tense voice adds a sharpness and concentration to the social commentary of the text that is very fitting for this poem’ (121). Having met Mannix and heard her perform many poems, I would suggest that this ‘tense voice’ is not adopted for this particular poem but is her ‘daily’ voice.

In using the term ‘daily’, I make the same distinction between ‘daily’ and ‘extra-daily’ as Eugenio Barba does in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, his study in

collaboration with Nicola Savarese. The book provides a dictionary of performance techniques and principles that are common across performance disciplines. Barba summarises:

Theatre Anthropology is the study of the behavior of the human being when it uses its physical and mental presence in an organised performance situation and according to principles which are different from those used in daily life. This extra-daily use of the body is what is called technique. (5)

Barba uses the terms ‘extra-daily’ and ‘daily’ when discussing the difference seen in a performer’s energy and use of body in their ‘daily’ life, and their ‘extra-daily’ performances (34). He explains that in performance ‘the body’s daily techniques can be replaced by extra-daily techniques, that is, techniques which do not respect the habitual conditionings of the body’ (9). The term ‘extra-daily’ can be used to describe all the intentional aspects of a poet’s performance. The ways in which a poet uses their voice and body in daily life compared to how they use their voice and body in performance reveals how they are engaging in live writing.

Mannix’s vocal timbre clearly impacts on Novak’s interpretation of the poem, however, as it is her ‘daily’ voice I suggest that it is not part of her live writing. Although Novak may have seen Mannix perform other poems, this is the only performance she mentions. When discussing a poet’s live writing it is helpful to have seen them perform more than one poem and to consider their performance in the context of their wider work. When considering what is and isn’t ‘live writing’ I try to differentiate between the general experience of watching a performance (during which the viewer might take in many aspects including ‘mistakes’ such as a poet knocking over their glass of water and the poet’s daily vocal timbre), and conscious choices made by the poet, which are part of their ‘live writing’.

We listen to poetry in performance differently to the way we listen to music. The German contemporary music composer Michel Hirsch works in a genre described in German as *sprechgesang* (‘sung-speech’). In *Lieder nach Texten aus dem taglichen Leben* (Songs after texts from real life) Hirsch composes with the features of spoken language, his composition is ‘based on originally documentary materials, i.e. on entirely non-musical sources’ (Hirsch loc 2173). He works with verbatim texts and

recordings, changing them to the extent that they are recognisable as German, but unintelligible. He explains his process:

Taped interviews, accidentally overheard or secretly recorded speech acts were transcribed in such a way, that the individual deviations from written language were advanced further and further and finally composed from a solely compositional angle into formal developments. (loc 2173)

Hirsch's work could be understood in the avant-garde tradition of sound poetry ('avant-garde tradition' being a widely accepted oxymoron, in this instance referring to sound poetry with a heritage in the Dada performances of post-war Zurich and artists such as Kurt Schwitters), however, unlike the sound poets, Hirsch is a composer and his work is heard and analysed through the lens of contemporary music, and considered in the context of Mauricio Kagel and Luciano Berio's compositions rather than the work of sound poets. Hirsch reflects on ways of listening:

Elements of semantically intelligible language grow rampant from the thus developed abstract speech music, so that the act of listening sways back and forth between musical hearing and linguistic hearing, playing with comprehension and non-comprehension as well as with the boundaries between language and music. (loc 2173)

Hirsch distinguishes between 'musical hearing' and 'linguistic hearing', suggesting we can move between different modes of listening to the same performance. Dick Higgins, in 'A Taxonomy of Sound Poetry' suggests that a sound poem, made up of no words at all, is heard as 'poetry' and not music. In part three of his essay he writes:

[Sound poetry] implies subject matter; even when some particular work is wholly non-semantic, as in the microphonic vocal explorations of Henri Chopin, the non-semantic becomes a sort of negative semantics – one is conscious of the very absence of words rather than, as in vocal music, merely being aware of the presence of the voice.

Higgins suggests that sound poetry is distinct from music which is 'usually the presentation or activization of space and time by means of the occurrences of sound'

(Ibid.). The strength of his argument is not that the forms are fundamentally different, but that the ways in which we listen to them are. This point acknowledges ideas discussed within reader-response theory – that meanings are the product of the listener’s subjective response and informed by their critical and personal backgrounds, the principle ‘that readers actively participate in the creation of meaning’ (Tompkins xvi). It demonstrates how expectation informs interpretation. When we are told a particular sound is ‘poetry’ we listen for different things within it than we do when told it is ‘music’. When listening to a sound poem we are aware that a poet is *writing* the ‘absence of words’ (Higgins). What is considered ‘sound poetry’ when performed by someone described as a ‘poet’ in the context of a literature event would be considered ‘music’ if performed by a person described as a ‘singer’ or ‘composer’ as part of a concert. Hirsch suggests we can move between ways of listening to one composition; the context informs the ways we listen. Contexts are never entirely controllable and audience members bring with them their own contexts and experiences – perhaps a musician will hear sound poetry as music rather than poetry. What the thoughts of both Higgins and Hirsch reveal is that there are different *ways of listening*.

2.3 Langue v parole

The basic distinction on which modern linguistics rests, and which is equally crucial to the structuralist enterprise in other fields, is Saussure’s isolation of *langue* from *parole*. The former is a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms, while the latter comprises the actual manifestations of the system in speech and writing. (Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* 9)

Since literary criticism became an academic discipline, the ways in which many critics listen to and analyse poetry and the sounds of poetry have had their foundations in modern linguistics (Bradford, *A Linguistic History* 1). Ever since Saussure differentiated between *langue* and *parole*, linguistics and its descendants within semiotics, structuralism and stylistics have taken as their subject the system of language (*langue*) and not the unique utterance (*parole*). Jonathan Culler summarises:

the linguist’s task is not to study utterances for their own sake; they are of interest to him only in so far as they provide evidence about the nature of the underlying system, the English language. (Ibid.)

Culler comments, ‘utterances themselves offer the linguist little that he can use’ (11). An isolated incident of strange vocal sound (whether accidental or intentional) would not impact a linguist’s understanding of the system of language and therefore, as Culler suggests, utterances offer the linguist ‘little’. Broadly speaking, speech is listened to by phoneticians in order to identify what it reveals about the *system* of language rather than the unique utterance (and *utterer*). This is why it is possible to have books on phonetics that do not have accompanying audio files.¹⁶ The focus is on principles, such as trends in intonation, features of particular accents, and conventions such as turn taking. These are aspects of speech that can be identified across multiple examples, and can indicate the ways language is used within particular regions or communities.

Wimsatt and Beardsley, influential researchers within literary theory, were interested in the underlying structure of poetry, not its performance. In ‘The Concept of meter: An Exercise in Abstraction’ they write: ‘A performance is an event, but the poem itself, if there *is* any poem, must be some kind of enduring object’ (587). For Wimsatt and Beardsley, because of its ephemeral status, the performance of a poem can never live up to the poem on the page. Their essay reveals that they view the poem and its poetic metre as identified silently from the page as superior to the poem in performance, even a ‘correct’ performance: ‘The meter, because it is artificial, precisely measured, frail if meticulous, tends to be overridden and, if not actually destroyed (as it cannot be in any correct reading), at least obscured’. They suggest that it is necessary to have a ‘rule for poetic reading’ (597). This emphasis on the poem as an object of discussion that is distinct from the unique utterance has endured. Today, although it is now possible to publish audio and audiovisual files alongside books, metrical analysis is most often conducted from the page, with performance being considered insofar as it conforms to an ideal theoretical version. This is the basis of Rueven Tsur’s research into linguistic metrics, ‘cognitive poetics’ and poetic rhythm. Tsur strives to identify what the rules for ‘correct’ readings are. He focuses on the line and the extent to which performance (usually by actors rather than poets) indicates line breaks and metre. Tsur analyses:

acoustic cues or alternative realizations of metric feet in strict relation to their possible contribution to the solution of the problems posed by the conflicting patterns

¹⁶ For instance, phoneticians refer to a ‘rising tone’ at the end of sentences to denote questions. This is a general principle that English speakers will be familiar with, so it can be referred to by providing examples on the page, as Peter Roach does in his introductory book, *Phonetics* (33).

of the verse structure. (*Poetic Rhythm* 99)

By ‘conflicting patterns’ Tsur refers to the ‘tension’ between the ‘metric pattern and the linguistic stress pattern’ (12). He studies the ‘competences’ of the performer:

the competence to identify the conflicts between stress pattern and metre; the competence to find a solution to the conflict, and the proper command of choice to carry out the solution. When the performance of a deviant verse line is judged rhythmical, we may assume that the reciter had command of all three competences; when not, we may make only more or less accurate guesses as for which one(s) of the competences failed. (Ibid.)

Overall, Tsur’s focus is on the ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ posed by the ‘conflicting patterns’ of language structure and metre. He views performance as something that can be executed in a ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ way (his words) based on the lineation and metrics of the poem as identified on the page. Tsur listens mainly to the performances of male actors with emphasised ‘received pronunciation’. He writes that ‘a great problem with English metre since the Renaissance is that nobody knows its rules’ and that when there is too much deviation from the metre ‘the verse line falls apart’ (409, 410). Tsur prioritises page over performance, seeing the written version of a poem as *the* version and the performance as *a* version.

Derek Attridge, in his study, *Poetic Rhythm* refers to the ‘musculature of the speech organs’ and encourages his readers to read the poems in the book aloud (1). Although he takes a less prescriptive approach to the discussion of metre and rhythm to Tsur, all of his analyses are conducted from the page. Like the linguists who comment on trends in intonation by reproducing speech on the page, most literary critics analyse rhythm and poetic metre based on theoretical conventions (*langue*) rather than specific instances of performed poems (*parole*).

When analysing a poetry performance my intention is usually to explore potential meanings communicated by that particular performance and the ‘utterance’ (*parole*) rather than to identify trends in ways of performing poetry (or ‘rules’ for ‘correct’ performances) that are widely applicable. That said, in the following chapter on “British Spoken Word Voice”, although I do listen to specific examples, my focus is on

identifying trends in intonation and I borrow from approaches to analysis used by phoneticians. If the aim is to make generalisations about ways of performing poetry shared by groups of poets then an approach that focuses on shared principles rather than unique utterances *is* useful.

2.4 Sound symbolism

Peter Middleton credits the lack of an ‘account of sound in poetry’ within literary theory to ‘its somewhat unexamined reliance on Saussure’s assumptions about sound’ (51). In the *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure famously states:

The link between signal and signification is arbitrary. Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, we can express this more simply as: *the linguistic sign is arbitrary*. (78)

Saussure defines the signal as the ‘sound pattern’ and the signification as the ‘concept’. Saussure’s ‘linguistic sign’ is the link between the ‘sound pattern’ and the ‘abstract’ concept. It is the connection between the two that is ‘arbitrary’. Essentially Saussure is pointing out that there is nothing innately tree-like about the word ‘tree’; words are tied to their meanings by convention and not by nature, which explains why different languages refer to the same phenomena using different words. Saussure states that this arbitrariness is ‘the organising principle for the whole of linguistics, considered as a science of language structure’, and it is why he focuses on the *langue* rather than *parole* (78). The emphasis on the system of language and not the utterance has provided the theoretical backing for a legacy of exploration of the ‘sound’ of language that does not involve listening. Strangely, this is the case even in studies of sound symbolism that set out to disprove Saussure’s rule of arbitrariness.

Saussure’s challengers in the field of sound symbolism (Jakobson, Waugh, Bolinger), cite onomatopoeic words as the clearest evidence against arbitrariness. Saussure acknowledges an ‘approximate imitation’ of the sounds of the referent within onomatopoeic words but points out that these words are ‘marginal phenomena’ and are nevertheless ‘partly conventionalised’, which is evidenced by the fact that different languages use different words/sounds to represent phenomena such as the (universal) dog’s bark (80). Dwight Bolinger concedes Saussure’s point to some extent,

commenting that ‘bang’ does not sound much like a gun shot, before pointing out that we need only a ‘slight resemblance’ between sound and meaning in order to connect the two:

One may even need to know the meaning of the word in order to associate it with the sound at all (how much does *bang* resemble the report of a gun?), but even a slight resemblance gives one the feeling of rightness between sound and sense. (19)

In her essay, ‘Against Arbitrariness’, Linda Waugh (a collaborator of Roman Jakobson) aims to demonstrate iconicity in the English lexicon. Like Jakobson, she draws on Peirce’s description of three types of icons: images, diagrams, and metaphors.¹⁷ An example of a visual icon is a photograph, which resembles what it refers to. Waugh posits that the equivalent in language is onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. Waugh notes series of onomatopoeic words that use the same sounds (*gaggle, garble, gargle, guzzle, gobble*), and observes that as well as sounding like what they refer to, they sound like each other. Sound symbolism differs to onomatopoeia (although both may occur in the one example). Sound symbolists suggest that meanings are associated with the sounds of vowels and consonants, connected to where in the mouth they are pronounced. Waugh summarises that sound symbolism observes:

the nearly universal correlation between the inherently higher-pitched front vowels (like English [i], [I], [e], [ɛ] and smallness and brightness (vs. the lower-pitched back vowels like [u], [ɑ] [ɔ], commonly associated with bigness and darkness). Such relations form part of the lexical fabric of English. This is perhaps best exemplified with diminutives, in which the higher-pitched sound is correlated with smallness. A well-known example includes words ending with the sound pronounced as /-i/ and spelled *-ie* or *-y*, as in *sweetie, cutie, dolly, baby, honey*. (74)

Although she discusses vocalised words, Waugh refers to sounds and words that can be ‘heard’ silently from the page rather than actual instances of speech. We might argue that the examples she gives here are associated with smallness and brightness mostly

¹⁷ Pierce’s semiotics differentiates between iconic and symbolic signs (*Collected Papers*). Iconic signs are visual and have a visual resemblance to what they refer to (a picture of a horse refers to an actual horse), symbolic signs are linguistic (the word horse refers to the actual horse) and their interpretation requires competence in language (my example).

due to the meaning of the word rather than where in the mouth the word is pronounced. Linked to the meaning is the context and the way they are (conventionally) said. It would be unusual to call someone a 'sweetie' in a 'big' and 'dark' voice, however, it is possible, and as Joey Kreiman and Diana Sidtis point out, 'the emotional tone of an utterance has a direct impact on the manner in which a listener processes spoken words' (304). The arguments for sound symbolism become even less convincing when we observe that there are many words that end with the same [i] vowel sound and are not associated with smallness, such as *money, junkie, bloody, study, country, many, rugby, bungee, lucky, ugly*, as well the many 'big' words that contain the [i] sound elsewhere (*evil, eaten, eager, beat, greed...*).

Derek Attridge explains that onomatopoeia is 'a matter of *langue* as well as *parole*' because it is something that 'readers respond [to] in a relatively consistent way', and has been conventionalised as part of a 'shared system' (*Peculiar Language* 141). Note that Attridge refers to 'readers' rather than 'listeners'. Attridge's analysis of James Joyce's *Ulysses* explores 'nonlexical onomatopoeia' and in spite of the many references to pitch, sound, noise, hearing, dynamics, and pronunciation, the analysis is done from the page. This is reasonable as *Ulysses* is a novel, but the choice to use a novel in order to discuss onomatopoeia is indicative of the wider theoretical approach to 'sound'. Attridge's conclusion, that 'onomatopoeia requires *interpretation* as much as any other system of signs does; it is a convention among conventions', aligns with Saussure who also describes onomatopoeia as a 'convention' (141).

Although onomatopoeia occurs when a word *sounds* like what it refers to, because it is a convention, part of a 'shared system', like poetic rhythm and metre, onomatopoeic words can be 'heard' silently on the page. Even when listing onomatopoeia as proof of non-arbitrariness, advocates of sound symbolism concede Saussure's point to some extent, acknowledging that meanings are 'conventionalised'. I suggest that researchers into sound symbolism, such as Waugh, Jakobson and Bolinger, demonstrate that within the system of language itself words are not arbitrary, but this is not what Saussure claimed. The fact that it is a 'system' indicates that there are patterns and connections between words, found in phenomena such as the suffix. We might assume that research into speech 'sound' would involve *listening*, however, the main researchers into sound symbolism are concerned with identifying principles based on assumed sound rather than exploring the meaning potential of non-conforming instances of heard sound.

2.5 'the noise that it makes is part of its meaning' (Brathwaite 271)

Although research into sound symbolism does not ultimately appear to contradict Saussure's statement of arbitrariness, it is nonetheless the case that words do not *feel* arbitrary; we associate the sound of a word with its meaning, and vice versa. We are so familiar with the conventions of our first language that although the sounds of words do not contain inherent meanings, we give them meaning. Research into sound symbolism demonstrates that we make connections between a sound and its meaning whenever we have the opportunity. This is not due to there being any intrinsic relationship between the two but is a result of the impressive imaginative ability of humans to make connections between the sounds of words and our experiences of what they refer to. Although the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, it does not follow that sound does not carry meaning, rather that meaning is not intrinsic to sound. Meaning can be *given* to sound by the system of language, context and convention but also, which is pertinent to this research, by the unique utterance of the poet.

Poets working in performance are exploring 'extra-daily' territory, in which they can play with conventions, and can give sounds and words new meanings through their use of voice. When the sound/word is given a meaning that we would not have been able to imagine from viewing the poem on the page, the voice becomes a part of the writing, contributing to the meaning potential of the poem. To discover how meaning is produced in performance we need to actually hear it. In his explorations of how 'the noise that it makes is part of the meaning', Caribbean poet and critic Kamau Brathwaite *listens* to poetry (271). He describes 'nation language' – the English creole of the Caribbean – by assigning material, environmental properties to its sound, revealing that the sound of the language contains within it the landscapes and cultures from which it is born:

It may be in English, but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or the wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time. (266)

If we assume that the sound of the language does not literally resemble the sounds of gunshots and waves, we might suggest that Brathwaite assigns these properties to the

melody of nation language. The associations are embedded in the sound as a result of Brathwaite's knowledge of the ways the language has changed over time. His knowledge and experiences of the histories of West Africa and the colonised Caribbean, histories littered with shouts, protest, gunshots and ocean travel, is imprinted on his associations of the melodies of the language. He makes those connections because of his knowledge and imagination of the places that formed the language, rather than because the melodies of the language *literally* imitate guns or waves. This reasoning does not take away from his observation, but demonstrates the human imaginative capability to imbue sound with material properties and meanings – an imaginative capability that poets working in performance harness.

In *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, Geneva Smitherman describes the importance of 'tonal semantics' within 'black communication'. Chiming with Brathwaite, she writes, the 'key to understanding black tonal semantics is to recognize that the sound of what is being said is just as important as "sense"' (135). She describes how the voice can be used 'like a musical instrument' to convey the 'semantics of tone', and that this is manifest in rhythm, pitch and stress, and can be grouped as: 'talk-singing, repetition and alliterative word play, intonational contouring, rhyme' (137). As an example of 'talk-singing' she cites the black preacher who combines:

straightforward talk with the cadence and rhythm of traditional black preaching style. The style is characterized by elongated articulation of single words, by heavy breathing, by lengthy pauses between words and phrases, and by constant interjections of the standard key expressions "ha," "aha," and "un-huh." (138)

We can hear a kind of talk-singing including 'elongated articulation of single words' in the performances of the late Jamaican dub poet, Michael ("Mikey") Smith. Smith predominantly published his poetry in performance and audio form. Linton Kwesi Johnson co-produced Mikey Smith's first (and only) album for Island Records, entitled *Mi Cyaan Believe It* in 1982. One year later, on the 17th August 1983 at the age of 28, Mikey Smith was murdered in the street by three men associated with the right wing Jamaican Labour Party (JLP). Brathwaite's interpretation of Smith's vocal sound demonstrates how poets can, through 'tonal semantics', imbue sound with material properties and meanings. Smith elongates the word 'Lawd' using vocal fry in many of his poems, for instance 'Black and White', 'Mi feel it', 'Mi Cyaan Believe It' and

‘Roots’.¹⁸ Vocal fry occurs naturally in speech, however, Smith’s use of vocal fry is exaggerated and sustained to create a distinctive extra-daily kind of ‘elongated articulation’. Kamau Brathwaite interprets this elongated sound as:

a decorative S90 *noise* (the S90 is an admired Japanese motorbike) which after a time becomes part of the sound structure and therefore meaning of the poem. On the page, Smith’s *Lawwwwwwww* is the S90. (301)¹⁹

Brathwaite’s S90 is not referenced by the language of the poem, but by the sound of the word ‘Lawd’. Remembering the poem by Thomas Lux (‘some people/hate the barn they knew’), the S90 that Brathwaite hears is the S90 that he ‘knew’, bringing with it not just the sound of a motorbike engine, but all the associations Brathwaite has with this sound. It is not a comparison that I would make, but having listened to a restored S90 I can hear why he draws the comparison. For Brathwaite, those properties of the sound are part of its meaning. His comparison gives us insight into his particular way of listening as well as into Smith’s performances.

A vocalisation acquires meaning not only in terms of what it sounds *like*, but also what it can represent. Carolyn Cooper, like Brathwaite, draws on history in assigning meanings to the sound of *Lawwwwww* in ‘Mi Cyaan Believe It’, suggesting Smith’s ‘heart-rending’ vocalization is the ‘protracted pain of generations of sufferers’, she says he takes on the ‘*persona* of Woman’ and her ‘belly pain’, ‘the specific anguish of child-bearing in a society that defies the poor to survive’ (69). For Cooper the sound is the pain of childbirth, a woman’s cries: ‘*ban mi belly an mi baaal*’. Her interpretation is informed by the content of the poem, but is also Cooper’s interpretation of the sound, which places the weight of meaning on female experience, providing a completely different association of meaning and sound to Brathwaite’s motorbike noise.

Further potential meanings might be suggested to the listener who hears Brathwaite’s

¹⁸ Vocal fry (also described as ‘creaky voice’) is a type of phonation described by Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis as occurring when ‘the [vocal] folds open and close abruptly, and remain closed for most of each cycle’ (62-63).

¹⁹ Brathwaite’s reference to the sound on ‘the page’ is surprising given that it is a sound that he is describing, it may be a slip of the tongue/pen; the essay was originally a talk in which Brathwaite played examples of the poems to his listeners. Brathwaite notes that Mikey Smith was ‘not concerned with the written script at all’ (300).

poem today. Knowing that supporters of a right-wing political party murdered him might give his *laaaaaawwd* a connotation of protest and dissent. His groan-sound can be heard as the protest of a dying man, the croak of the insides of a body, and these meanings might work alongside the semantic meaning of the word. It could be a call for someone who may or may not be listening, a call that is made in a church, in religious songs, in prayer. It might bring with it associations of the uses of the word in other songs and poems, such as calypso singer, Mighty Sparrow's refrain in 'Slave': '*Oh lord I wanna be free*'. Smith's *laaawwwwd* is the psychophysical representation of his bodily-thought. It is the physical, bodily vocal expression of 'Mi Cyaan Believe It'. The longer the vocal fry lasts the more pronounced the disbelief; the more absurd the vocal fry, the more it comments on the absurdity of the situation that Smith *cyaan believe*.

Without negating all the above meaning possibilities contained in the sound, I also suggest that the idiosyncratic vocal fry of Mikey Smith now *means* Mikey Smith.

2.6 Beyond sound symbolism in Salena Godden's 'Imagine if you had to lick it!'

Derek Attridge points out that onomatopoeia is a convention that requires interpretation:

to respond to onomatopoeia of any kind it is necessary to have learned how to do so [...] onomatopoeia requires *interpretation* as much as any other system of signs does; it is a convention among conventions. (*Peculiar Language* 141)

Attridge states that for onomatopoeia to work, it is necessary to have 'some prior familiarity with that sound' (144). In this section I demonstrate how *listening* to a performance by Salena Godden complicates this statement. Through her use of voice, as well as playing with our prior familiarity with sounds, Godden assigns unfamiliar sounds meaning. I have seen Godden perform 'Imagine if you had to lick it!' on multiple occasions. The poem is a list of objects, substances, body parts and people, which Godden imagines licking. The poem appears in her collection *Fishing in the Aftermath*. The version of the poem I discuss is available on Youtube, Godden is performing at 'The Monday Night Alternative', in 2009 at the Norwich Arts Centre, the event was produced by Soapbox, a live literature organisation based in East Anglia.

In our interview Godden recounts how the poet Neil Rollinson asked her: 'would you

walk into a pub and order a pint in that voice?’ She said that as soon as he said that she started to perform her poems in ‘the voice I would use if I was ordering a pint’. This reveals that Godden’s use of voice is a conscious part of her live writing; the conversational ‘pint- ordering’ voice is one of several voices she uses in this poem, the other main modes of delivery include a cartoonish ‘Darth Vader’ voice and a proclaiming ‘announcer’ kind of voice.

Bernstein comments, ‘one of the effects of chatty introductions before each poem is to acoustically cue the performer’s talking voice so that it frames the subsequent performance’ (16). Usually the ‘talking voice’ (the pint-ordering voice) frames the performance by sounding acoustically different, ‘chatty’ and informal in contrast to the voice the poet then inhabits within their poem. In ‘Imagine if you had to lick it!’ Godden does not shift her tone as she moves from the introduction to the poem; the introduction is integrated into the beginning of the poem. Godden uses this pint-ordering voice within her poems as well as in her introductions. Godden introduces and begins her poem in the following way:

All my life I’ve done this, okay, I’ve done this all my life, even since I was a child... when I was hungover or nauseous, yeah as a child when I was hungover...phew! ... yeah when I’m hungover or nauseous on a tube train or a bus I stare at the foulest things the stomach turning churning things and this voice comes into the back of my head.²⁰

The opening lines of her poem are changed slightly in performance (compared to the print version). In performance her language is more conversational, with the addition of ‘okay’ and ‘yeah’. She adds detail ‘ever since I was a child’ then responds to the live moment and her audience with ‘phew!’ The published version on the page begins:

I have been doing this my whole life.
When I am hungover on a tube train or a bus
I stare at the most stomach turning churning things
and this voice inside my head says (120)

²⁰ I am not adding line breaks to the transcript of her performance as the differences between her performance and page versions mean I do not know where she would insert the breaks. I am maintaining the capitalisation of ‘IMAGINE’ that Godden has on the page, however the reader should bear in mind the punctuation is mine (based on her performance) rather than Godden’s. The transcription is not ‘written’ in this way by Godden, and is only reproduced to help identify moments of the performance.

A comparison of page to performance is not done in order to see whether Godden gets her own poem ‘right’, but to reveal how she writes live. Her poems have room for improvisation within them, as she describes in an online article for The Poetry School, her poems often involve ‘repeating loops, backtracking phrases, cutting and pasting in real time’ (‘How I did it’). As I explore further in chapter four, her poems on the page often act as ‘scores’ that she riffs on. Several lines from ‘Imagine if you had to lick it!’ appear in performance but not on the page. Godden often ends her poems differently. Godden returns to the pint-ordering voice of her introduction with an aside mid-way through her performance, when she expands:

I wanna make clear I don’t mean like [*demonstrates with squeaky noise*] the tip of your tongue I’m talking about the back of your tongue where your toothbrush goes and makes you gag, alright, like a really thirsty dog on a summer’s day in a puddle [*demonstrates dog drinking noise*]. [2:37]

This is also in the printed version, minus the reference to the thirsty dog:

and I don’t mean the tip but with the very back of your tongue
like the place that makes you retch if you touch it with a toothbrush (120)

The page version ‘performs’ on the page. The word ‘imagine’ is always capitalised, and the final instance of the word contains spaces between each letter: ‘I M A G I N E’. The use of capitals helps the reader to ‘hear’ Godden’s voice as they read. In the introduction to *Fishing in the Aftermath* Godden notes that she has tried to ‘keep the CAPS LOCK style and spirit of that punk-ass poet true to the page’ (16). Godden returns to the pint-ordering mode at the end of the poem, which also differs in different performances and published versions. This performance ends:

I’ll always do this, stare at the ugly and the rotten and the rancid putrid essence
until I gag and I’m forced to look away. It makes the journey go faster.
IMAGINE.²¹

²¹ The page version does not end with ‘IMAGINE’ but ‘...and it gives me something/else to be nauseous about...’ (*Fishing in the Aftermath* 120)

As Godden explains in our interview, she often uses ‘different voices’. She describes ‘the one I use in “The Good Cock”, which is like a Darth Vader voice’. This ‘Darth Vader voice’ is also used in ‘Imagine if you had to lick it!’ It is a gravelly voice, in her lower register, to which she adds a slight ‘lo-fi’ effect.²² Godden achieves this effect by cupping the microphone with her hand, making a resonant chamber that changes the frequency response to create distortion. Being very close to the microphone amplifies the lower frequencies of her voice. Godden always uses this vocal effect for the ‘voice that comes into the back of my head’, the voice that says: ‘Imagine if you had to lick it!’ Amplification enables the detail of the voice and breath to be heard. Patrice Pavis describes this as a paradox:

Paradoxically, it is once again technology, the microphone in this instance, that most effectively enables the bodily, drive-ridden dimension of the voice to be revealed.
(136)

Patrice Pavis’ comment is a general one, not attached to any specific instance of listening (his is another example of a study that considers ‘voice’ in performance without referring to any specific instance of vocalisation). The paradox Pavis identifies can be applied to Godden’s use of voice in this poem, where her use of technology brings to the fore the bodily dimension of the voice. The use of the microphone emphasises the visceral, gravelly quality of the sound. Godden allows us to hear her spit, her mouth, tongue, and a gravelly kind of phlegm in her voice. She writes with, as Bernstein puts it, ‘animalady’, the ‘carnality of language’ (22). The poem is about the power of the imagination to conjure up bodily reactions; Godden constantly calls upon us to imagine our tongues, our spit, our stomachs churning. If the spectator is not playing the imaginative game with Godden, she forces us to do so when she says: ‘Look at the person on the left of you... IMAGINE’. This brings the game into the room, prompting each audience member to imagine licking the person next to them (and perhaps to imagine another person licking them). Each person in the room has a different experience of imagining licking and being licked; Godden live writes with the imaginations of her spectators.

Godden’s third main mode of speech in this poem can be described as an ‘announcer’

²² Lo-fi is a common vocal effect that can be applied to the voice, and makes the voice sound rougher, reverting the quality back to the kind of sound that microphones and recording equipment used to produce – rather than the ‘hi-fi’ (high fidelity) sound we have now.

voice. This is the voice she uses to list all the things that she imagines licking. It is louder than the other modes and in a higher register. It is the kind of mode that might be used by a street seller, or perhaps someone giving a tour on a bus, pointing out landmarks. Each mode brings a different association: of daily conversation, of a scary but cartoonish filmic character, and of a street seller advertising wares (subverted in this context as the voice is advertising things Godden does not actually want to lick). The modes also gain new associations and meanings in Godden's performance; the pint-ordering mode feels confessional and intimate, the Darth Vader voice becomes the voice in the back of our heads too, and gains increasing comedy value as she plays with its timing and extends the sequences (for instance Godden consults her page at minute 02:16 then just says 'IMAGINE' again, as if this is what she has just read). The announcer voice is playful, as if we're on the bus calling out the things we see through the windows. Godden's voices reveal to us what her imagination *sounds* like.

As Attridge explains, we respond to onomatopoeia because we have learned to do so. Godden plays with these learned associations within her performance. At minute 01:45 she mimes a train and demonstrates a steam train sound, complete with a whistle. Most trains no longer sound anything like this, however, this association of sound with gesture and what it represents ('train') has been taught to us since childhood. Godden exploits this common knowledge to give the sense that we are on some kind of strange train journey into the world of sound and imagination, a train that makes an 'IMAGINE' sound as it chugs. Alternatively, perhaps she is simply performing for us the context in which she has these imaginings (although, again, this kind of train is nothing like the tube train Godden mentions in her opening). When Godden demonstrates the noise of a dog licking a puddle we interpret it as such partly through context, partly because we have knowledge (through cartoons as well as experience) of how a large dog drinking might sound, and also because the sound itself is onomatopoeic [02:49]. Like the train sound, this sound doesn't require any stretch of interpretation. In another moment that occurs in this performance but not in the printed version, Godden plays with an American accent. Here is a transcription of this moment, revealing how she live writes by shifting between voices. (I use [A] for 'announcer' voice, [D.V] for 'Darth Vader' voice and [A.V/O] for this 'American voiceover' mode.)

[A] That tramp's cock! [D.V] IMAGINE. IMAGINE. [A.V] With honey, [D.V] IMAGINE ... [A.V] Philadelphia, [A.V/O] chocolate spread ... that tramp... that

tramp, you and a jar of chocolate spread, nutella... nutella tramp (*giggles*) [D.V]
IMAGINE ... IMAGINE (*giggles*) [3:00]

Godden's 'American voiceover' mode mimics a male American voiceover on an old-fashioned TV advert. Godden achieves this through a combination of accent, low vocal pitch, intonation, and the context that is provided by her choice of language and syntax. Although the word choice and syntax might make us think of advertising, at no point does Godden tell us this is what she aims for. Her use of voice alone brings with it associations of American advertising, demonstrating what Theo Van Leeuwen describes as 'provenance':

When a sound is imported from one 'place' (one era, one culture, one social group) into another, its semiotic potential derives from the associations which the 'importers' have with the 'place' from which they have imported the sound. (*Speech, Music, Sound* 210)

When Godden uses her voice in a way that satirises American advertising, she also 'imports' all our associations with America as a country, with capitalism, commercialisation and brands such as MacDonalDs. The absurdity of advertising is accentuated by her use of the mode to 'advertise' a list of things that she and the audience find so *unlickable*.²³

At minute 01:35, Godden performs a high-pitched noise that lasts several seconds: 'Chinese takeaway like noodelly noodles looking like maggots all round the dustbin'. The sound begins low and moves to a high pitch:

Sound 2.1 Salena Godden 'Imagine if you had to lick it!'



²³ It is possible that Godden wants her audience to feel conflicted by her objectification and mocking of the 'tramp'. If she continued to list people or things that implicate her audience in collective revulsion towards poverty this might be read as an intentional strand of the poem, however this is the only occurrence and nothing in Godden's performance suggests she is intentionally making her audience complicit in a dangerous juxtaposition, which suggests this is an uncritical objectification.

This noodle sound is slightly like the noise created by feedback. It twists and slides around roughly five pitches, with an interval between the lowest and highest sound of about an octave. Outside of this performance it would have no particular meaning. In this way it differs from Godden's use of the train sound, which *would* be understood in another context. There is nothing inherently noodle-like about the noise. It may be that other listeners arrive at different meanings, perhaps simply hearing it as a squeal of disgust; in my subjective experience of the poem, Godden teaches us (or me), in the moment of performance, that this sound is the sound of noodles... or to be precise, this is the sound of Chinese takeaway noodles that look like maggots around a dustbin. The way in which Godden pulls the squeal out of the word itself (connecting the sound with the content) is probably what makes me link the sound to noodles. We have never learned to interpret a noise such as this one as the sound of noodles. However, within this performance, Godden gives symbolism to the sound. Because this does not rely on any previous understanding or association of sound and image, this is something that can only be achieved out loud, through Godden's live writing. It demonstrates how actually listening to sound can expand the notion of sound symbolism.

2.7 Notation

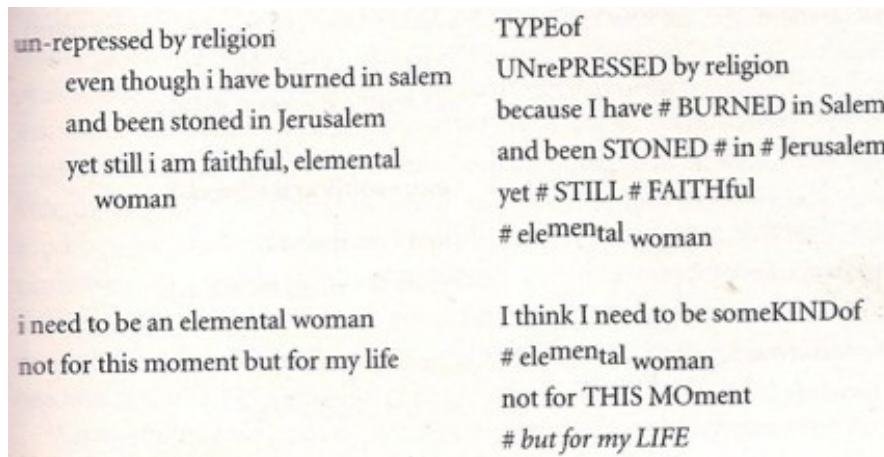
Notation provides proof of listening. I transcribed Godden's performance (above) using a few abbreviations to indicate where the shifts between different vocal qualities occur. This helps indicate what it is that I *hear* when I listen to her performance. It enables the reader to confirm what I mean by the various vocal qualities. There is no single way of notating a poem and not all notational methods are appropriate for all poems. Musical notation can indicate both rhythm and pitch, or just one or the other. Simple metrical notation can indicate stresses when analysed from the page and a similar approach can indicate where the beat lands in rhythmical performance, or where stress lands in non-rhythmical performance. Linguists notate and represent speech in various ways: pitch analysis software can produce spectrograms and identify amplitude, frequency in Hertz and intonational contours. Today's oral literature researchers tend to have descriptive approaches to notation that include details of performance such as gesture, facial expression and indications of dynamics.²⁴

²⁴ Oral researchers have not always captured these features of performance. Ruth Finnegan comments that 'all of the variegated aspects' of performance such as 'expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity, or humour, receptivity to the reactions of the audience' are 'most often overlooked in recording and interpreting

2.7.1 ‘Reading’ oral poems

Dennis Tedlock and John Miles Foley annotate oral performances using typography and description. These descriptive annotations sometimes borrow from musical terminology, for instance, ‘staccato’. They use typographical features such as capitalisation for loud words. Falling intonation of a line can be indicated by words transcribed in falling patterns down the page. The title of Foley’s book, *How to Read an Oral Poem* indicates that his emphasis is not on analysing the performed poem, but on encouraging his readers to read the poem from his transcriptions: ‘It invites readers to take an active and participatory role, to join the oral poet’s oral audience’. Foley writes: ‘If such transcriptions of performative features succeed in helping readers voice and literally em-*body* texts, they accomplish their purpose’ (101, 102). He provides an ‘interpretative tool kit for reading oral poetry’ or a ‘how-to manual’ (xiii, 100). In the past, field recordings were of low quality or unavailable, in which case the transcription would be the only evidence. Foley’s book is accompanied by a website which includes videos of the performances he analyses. Foley includes ‘North American slam poetry’ in his understanding of oral poetry. Foley notates a ‘slam poem’ by Lynne Procope entitled ‘elemental woman’ – demonstrating that the method can be applied to notating poetry in performance. Foley includes the poem as it appears published on the page on the left for comparison.

Figure 9. Foley/ Procope ‘elemental woman’ (Foley 99)



instances of oral literature’ (*The Oral and Beyond* 79).

The hashtags indicate a ‘short pause (less than one second)’ (98). Foley’s capitalised parts of words indicate ‘loudness’. From the typography we might imagine that there are three main pitches the poem is delivered in, with sudden shifts between them. Even this level of detail does not tell us everything about Procope’s performance. We have no sense of the quality of the vocal sound, her accent, or the rhythm. The capitalisations are unspecific, suggesting sudden jumps in dynamic. Foley emphasises the value of his transcription over the ‘text bound’ version presented by the poet, which he describes as ‘frozen outside its natural life in performance’ (98). This de-values the performativity of the page version by Procope (with its use of the lower case ‘i’, layout, line and stanza breaks). Foley writes, ‘an ethnopoetic transcription does offer a way to partially recover what the conventional printed page deletes’ (101). However, it is not possible to ‘recover’ sound on the page, and Foley’s transcription deletes what Procope’s page version includes. Trying to re-perform Procope’s poem from Foley’s transcription involves implicating Foley as a kind of joint writer, privileging the page version that he provides. If the aim is to recreate a particular performance, this is easier to do by listening to it than by reading a transcription.

Although analysing a poem in performance requires working from a specific instance of the poet performing the poem, methods such as Foley’s can be useful in analysis. Notation of this kind might help identify specific features that the analyser wishes to discuss. When used alongside page and performance versions of a poem, these techniques can help draw the listener’s attention to details of volume and pitch and have the advantage of not requiring specialist knowledge of phonology or music.

2.7.2 Notating pitch/frequency

Whilst metre and rhythm are often analysed within poetry, intonation is largely ignored. It is a feature of performance that is invisible on the page and has not been regarded as part of writing. A textbook, *Practical Phonetics and Phonology* defines intonation as follows:

Intonation tunes operate over an extent greater than a single word, usually over complete clauses or sentences. Intonation is crucial to human communication, supplying types of meaning additional to what is supplied by the words themselves. Think how often you hear people come out with statements like: “It wasn’t so much

what he said – it was more the way he said it.” (Collins and Mees 140)

In an essay on ‘Intonation and Metrical Theory’ David Crystal asks: ‘why was stress singled out at the expense of pitch in the first place?’ He argues that linguistic metrics has focused on stress at the expense of intonation due to ‘the syllabic orientation of traditional and linguistic metrics’ in which stress is associated with syllables, while intonation is viewed as a feature of phrases and sentences (11, 22). Intonation falls within speech ‘prosody’. Kreiman and Sidtis define prosody in the following way:

Prosody traditionally encompasses average pitch and pitch variability (or the mean and variability of fundamental frequency), loudness (or intensity) mean and variation, the large array of temporary factors that determine perceived speech rate and rhythm, and voice quality narrowly defined (for example, creakiness and breathiness, which function subtly – and sometimes not so subtly – in everyday speech to communicate meaning). (261)

The notation used by phoneticians to analyse intonation can be applied to poetry in performance. Phoneticians categorise the most commonly used intonation patterns with terms such as ‘fall’, ‘fall-rise’ and ‘rise’. They use these categories to identify general rules of spoken language, for instance that questions usually end with rising tones and statements with falling tones. A common notational method is to indicate where the nucleus (main emphasis) of the sentence lies and the tone on the nucleus and the pitch of the end of the sentence/phrase, for instance as follows:

You 'want to talk to /who? (Wells 21)

Figure 10. (Wells 21)

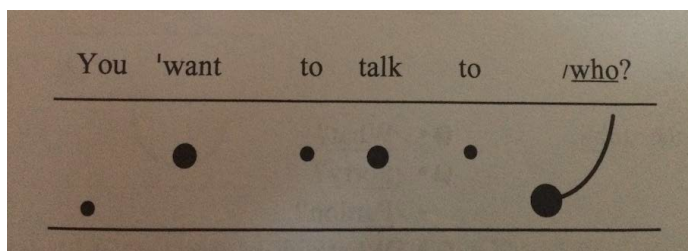
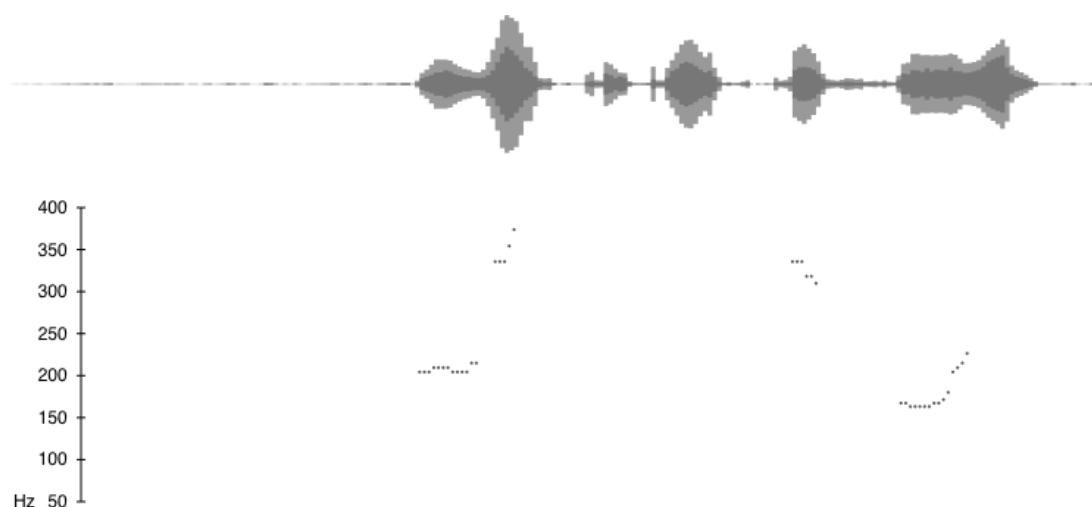


Figure 10 indicates the broad intonation of the line. The first method (Wells 21) does not tell us the extent of the rising pitch. The second method (Figure 10) has no stave or indication of pitch/frequency but can indicate the extent of the rise in comparison to the

rough pitches of the rest of the sentence. Phoneticians also use software to analyse the frequency of the voice in Hertz, and amplitude in decibels. In speech, the faster the frequency of the vibrations of the vocal folds, the higher the pitch. Pitch is a musical term and frequency is a scientific term. Frequency can be translated into pitch (for instance 440 Hertz is the A above middle C), however, frequency is a more accurate calculation that measures the frequency of vibrations in a sound wave. For instance, a sound might be at the frequency of 441. In musical notation we would probably hear and describe this as A above middle C, except it would be slightly out of tune – slightly high or ‘sharp’.

Marit MacArthur has written an article for *Jacket Magazine* introducing the software Gentle and Drift as open-source tools for speech analysis. Gentle can transcribe the words of a performance (it produces numerous errors which need to be corrected by the transcriber). Drift identifies frequency in Hertz and provides pitch contour lines that show how the pitch of speech moves up and down (the intonation). It also provides amplitude graphs of the sound waves, giving an indication of the intensity of the word and its volume. Wells’ book is accompanied by a CD, which includes a recording of the line notated above. I processed this sound file using Drift, and produced the following spectrogram:

Figure 11. Spectrogram of sound file ‘You want to talk to who?’ (Wells 21 [2.3])



The amplitude is indicated at the top of the spectrogram, and the marks below indicate intonation and frequency. The final rising tone on ‘who’ is not as clear as in Figure 10.

Drift has not picked up all the frequencies of the voice (we can see that ‘talk’ is represented in amplitude but not in frequency). Figure 10 depicts the rising tone at the end of ‘who’ as ending on a pitch that is higher than the rest of the sentence. Figure 11 indicates that the highest pitch is heard on the word ‘want’ rather than ‘who’. My ear tells me that the highest pitch is on ‘who’, and it is about four tones higher than the pitch of ‘want’. This suggests that the spectrogram is wrong and that Figure 10 provides a clearer indication of the intonation of the question. Although the spectrogram is not as clear as Figure 10, it does tell us that the frequency of the tone on ‘who’ moves from about 158Hz to 235Hz, which is a little above an E flat to a little above a B flat, a considerable interval of about a fifth (I hear it as an interval of about a seventh). I suspect that in this instance Drift has not ‘heard’ the very end of the rise on the word ‘who’. Notation helps to indicate what aspect of the sound is being described, but the clearest information is available by listening to the sound itself. The rising tone can be confirmed by listened to the sound file provided by Wells.

Sound 2.2 (Wells 21 [2.3])



Spectrograms can provide too much information about what is *not* being discussed, and too little about what is. Drift works better for some sound files than others, depending on the clarity of the recording and the amount of background sound. It often provides clearer spectrograms when processing poetry performance than speech, especially when the ‘falling’ and ‘rising’ tones of speech are typically accentuated in performance. When discussing poetry in performance my focus is on what I can hear rather than what a programme might be able to identify (for instance I can hear and identify pitches, with the help of a piano or other instrument, while programmes such as Drift indicate frequency in Hertz, a micro-measurement too precise for human listeners to identify). However, pitch analysis software is useful as it can visually indicate trends in delivery such as a consistent use of falling intonation at the ends of phrases and is neater and often more efficient than notating by hand.

When a poet performs words that are sustained on pitches recognised by the Western

chromatic scale they move from speech to song, away from intonation and towards melody. If we attempt to notate speech using the Western musical stave, we either need to indicate microtones or we need to shift the pitch to the nearest semitone, thereby changing it. As speech is microtonal, when it is put into a classical Western musical stave the pitches must be slightly shifted to accommodate the chromatic scale. The ear *can* identify microtones, particularly to the nearest quarter, however, this is practically impossible for non-musicians and difficult for many trained musicians. David Crystal points out that some scholars (such as Magdics, Siertsema, and Trager & Smith) ‘have tried to use a musical notation to transcribe pitch differences in speech’ but this method has been rejected, as we do not speak in the chromatic scale. Crystal quotes Schubiger, ‘we cannot speak out of tune’ (*Prosodic Systems* 111). More recent researchers including Julia Novak have also used musical notation to indicate pitch in performance, which is not effective for the same reasons.

2.7.3 Metre v rhythm

Other than rap, or spoken word that is performed to a beat, poems are not usually performed in recognisable time signatures. However, many performed poems have rhythmical elements or sections, so it can be useful to have an objectively accurate way of indicating rhythmic elements of a poem. This enables the critic and their reader to visually confirm or understand conclusions that the critic draws from their interpretation of the poet’s use of rhythm. In performance, rhythm exists in only one way (the way it is performed); when a poem is written on the page, two scholars can debate the nuances of metre and speculate on more than one potential performance. Literary criticism has tended to focus on poetic metre and rhythms assumed based on the poem on the page rather than musical and heard rhythm (see Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm*). Metrical analysis is usually conducted from the page rather than from the poet’s performance. Although the two may converge, there is a difference between metre that is identified from a page, and rhythm that is heard when listening to performance. For instance in ‘Hip-Hip & Shakespeare?’ a performance demonstration, the poet/rapper Akala performs Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 18’ (‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day’) in 4/4 time. He shifts iambic pentameter (five stresses per line) into a 4/4 rhythm (four beats per bar). This is done very easily, ‘I haven’t doctored it to make it fit the rhythm’.²⁵ Akala does

²⁵ The iambic pentameter is usually identified on the page as: ‘Shall **I** compare thee **to** a summer’s **day**’. In Akala’s performance this becomes ‘**Shall** I compare thee **to** a summer’s **day**’.

not comment on the difference between pentameter and 4/4; he wishes to point out the similarities between hip hop, grime and Shakespeare. Akala's demonstration reveals that a rhythmical poetry performance is not necessarily the result of a metrical poem, and there are ways of performing metrical poems that make the metre that was clear on the page inaudible, or totally different, in performance. Time signature *can* converge with metre, but they are different.

In *Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler echoes Akala's point, describing rap as a modern form of lyric that focuses on rhythm rather than melody (172). Culler discusses metre and rhythm, however, does not distinguish between listening to rhythm in performance and discussing rhythm and metre from the page. With the exception of an analysis of 'The Message', a rap from the early eighties by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Culler's study is of 'hearing' from the page. In his essay entitled 'Auden and Britten's *Night Mail*: Rap before Rap' Derek Attridge also wishes to point out the similarities between rap and lyric poetry, by comparing a rap by Ice-T to Auden and Britten's composition, 'Night Mail'. The wish to find similarities between rap and lyric poetry means that the key differences between the forms are not identified, and this has an impact on listening, notation and analysis. It is useful to analyse rap not so much to point out the similarities between metre and rhythm, but for what it reveals about the differences between analysing poetry on the page and in performance, the differences between metre and rhythm, ways of listening, and how 'flow' is part of the poet/rapper's live writing.²⁶

This section considers the ways Culler and Attridge notate and analyse rap in order to explore the convergences and contradictions between analysing poetry in performance and on the page, the challenges of notation, and the properties of flow, rhythm and metre. Although, in *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler includes a wide literature review tracing understandings of 'rhythm' and 'metre', he also conflates the two (161-172). The fact that he does not make a clear distinction between rhythm that is heard in performance and metre that is identifiable on the page is apparent in his *metrical* approach to analysing the *rhythm* of 'The Message'. Culler indicates the stresses of the 'four beat lines' as follows (I am reproducing his use of bold font to indicate stress):

²⁶ The word 'flow' is used to refer to a rapper's individual and distinctive patterns of delivery in performance, as Adam Bradley writes: 'Flow is an MC's lyrical fingerprint' (30).

I **can't** take the **smell**, I **can't** take the **noise**,
Got no **money** to move **out**, I guess I **got** no **choice**.
Rats in the **front** room, **roaches** in the **back**,
Junkies in the **alley** with the **baseball bat**. (172)

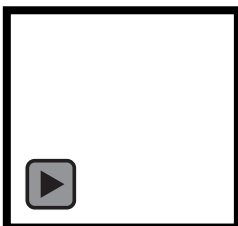
Sound 2.3 Silva reading 'The Message' using beats identified by Culler (172)



Although the two mistakes in this transcription may appear to be minor, they mean that the syncopation is erased. Culler adds the word 'I' to the first line ('can't take the noise') and removes the syncopation by placing the beat on 'can't' instead of identifying the virtual beat just before 'take'. This repeats the pattern of placing the emphasis on 'can't', rather than the more interesting syncopation that is heard in performance (and requires a pause after 'smell' in order to land 'can't' on the next beat). In performance the word 'junk' is elongated; the beat actually comes just between the syllables 'junk' and 'ies'. Here is the correct notation. I indicate 'virtual beats' in which the beat does not land on a syllable with a 'B' in brackets:

I **can't** take the **smell**, can't [B]take the **noise**,
Got no **money** to move **out**, I guess I **got** no **choice**.
Rats in the **front** room, **roaches** in the **back**,
Jun[B]kies in the **alley** with the **baseball bat**.

Sound 2.4 Silva reading 'The Message' using beats identified above.²⁷



²⁷ and heard in the Grandmaster Flash performance of 'The Message' [1:02].

Although Attridge emphasises the importance of reading aloud in his study *Poetic Rhythm*, throughout the book he conducts metrical analysis based on page rather than performed versions of poems (3). Attridge says that there are differences between poetic and musical metre. As Attridge explains, in rap the ‘virtual beats’ are ‘heard as actual beats in the accompaniment’ (*Poetic Rhythm* 92). However, it is the misidentification of virtual beats that makes Attridge’s analysis ‘The Coldest Rap (Part 2)’ by Ice-T inaccurate. Like Culler, Attridge does not identify the virtual beats that are ‘heard as actual beats in the accompaniment’. Attridge notates the beats of Ice-T’s ‘The Coldest Rap’ as follows (in the essay he places ‘B’ over the syllable. I have continued using bold font to indicate these syllables instead).

Some **people** claim **that** I’m **born** to **play**
Cause I’m your **Ice-tea** on the **sunny day** (‘Rap before Rap’ 122)

The correct emphasis is as follows; I have placed virtual beats in brackets:

Some **people** claim **that** I’m **born** to play **[B]**
Cause I’m your **Ice-tea** **[B]** on the **sunny** day **[B]**

Although the two versions are clearly different, this kind of notation does not reveal the extent of the differences in rhythm. There are various ways of performing both of the above versions, for instance ‘**sunny day**’ could be performed as two quavers followed by a crotchet, or a dotted quaver, semiquaver then quaver (with the final quaver rest in silence). In fact, because his notation is inaccurate, although we know where he places the beat, it is impossible to know what Attridge was hearing *between* the beats. Using musical notation to notate rhythm means that not only the beats are indicated, but all the rhythms between them are too.

Attridge compares the Ice-T rap to a recording of a poem by Auden set to music by Benjamin Britten (‘Night Mail’), drawing a comparison between the two and describing the ‘Night Mail’ as ‘rap before rap’. The similarity is found in the metre/beat. The 4/4 time signature of the Ice-T rap is comparable to the four-stress tetrameter of Auden’s poem. The other similarity is the spoken rather than sung tone. By focusing on the Auden poem and simplifying the rhythm of the Ice-T rap, Attridge misses differences that are more revealing as the similarities. Britten realises a strict poetic metre in his

setting of Auden’s words to music. The distinctive feature of the Britten/Auden collaboration is that words are consistently aligned with the beat, there are no dotted rhythms or syncopation, and the result is a regularised, dependable and predictable train-like rhythm, mirroring the regularised, dependable and predictable features of the train that delivered the night mail. Just as ‘Night Mail’ is distinctive due to its coinciding of word with beat, Ice-T’s syncopated flow is part of his live writing, revealing an offbeat, playful/player, refreshing/dangerous, unpredictable persona.

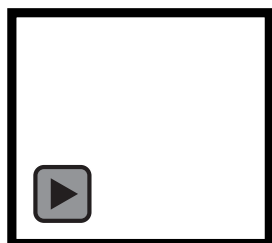
2.7.4 Musical notation

Julia Novak uses musical notation to notate a performance of ‘The Pool Players, Seven at the Golden Shovel’ (popularly called ‘We Real Cool’) by Gwendolyn Brooks. Novak notates Brooks’ performance at The Guggenheim Museum in 1983 as follows:

Figure 12. (Novak 94)



Sound 2.5 Silva reading Figure 12.



Novak puts the poem into a 4/4 signature (four beats per bar). She describes it as ‘a regular syncopated rhythm in 4/4 time’ (94). Novak places the second word of the bar after the second beat of the bar rather than on it. To do this she inserts a quaver rest after the first beat of each bar. The resulting syncopation in her notation is quite ‘jazzy’ (as

In order to place words on the correct beat of the bar the listener needs to identify the time signature, and the beats correctly. As with all non-mechanical poetry and musical performances there are details in Brooks' delivery that are not indicated in this notation, but these details do not have an impact on the time signature or the beats on which the words land. Novak's notation vastly changes the performance in order to fit it into 4/4. This is likely due to her use of musical software (Obtiv Octava) rather than her ear to notate the poem.²⁹ When a recording is fed into software and notated automatically, the analyst does not need to listen to it. If the analyst cannot read music then it is impossible for them to know whether the sound has been notated accurately. It may be that trust of software to 'hear' better than the human ear results in Novak making conclusions based on the page rather than the performance.

Musical notation can reveal more clearly how inaccurate Attridge's notation of the Ice-T's rap is. Here is a musical notation of the rhythm that uses the beats suggested by Attridge. I am indicating beats by using the 'ustaccatissin' symbol [''], to make it easier for the reader to connect the musical notation with Attridge's identification of stress. (As the exercise is for the purpose of identifying rhythm rather than pitch it is notated on one note.) Sound 2.7 is my reading of Figure 14 (following the notation that uses Attridge's beats rather than listening to the rap itself).

Figure 14. Musical notation using Attridge's identification of stress ('Rap before Rap' 122)

The image shows three lines of musical notation for a rap. Each line is on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are all on a single pitch, and the rhythm is indicated by the placement of notes and stems. Above each note is a small square symbol representing an 'ustaccatissin' mark. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Line 14: Some peo - ple claim that I'm born to play cause I'm your

Line 16: Ice - Tea on the sun - ny day I make the go - ers come, the lea - vers stay I make the

Line 18: lo - vers kiss and the work - ers play I make the

²⁹ Novak comments that she uses Obtiv Octava in her study (129).

Sound 2.7 Silva reading Figure 14.



Attempting to notate the rap using the beats that Attridge suggests results in numerous errors, such as having to make ‘play cause I’m your’, ‘stay I make the’ and ‘play I make the’ into equal semiquavers. I had to change the length of many of the words in order to fit the rap into the beats Attridge identified. Using musical notation immediately makes it obvious that the beats identified by Attridge result in a performance totally different to Ice-T’s (this is the case whatever the rhythm between the beats is). Below is the accurate rhythmic notation. The key differences can be seen in the use of dotted notes and the rests (pauses) that carry the beat. These elements create Ice-T’s signature syncopated flow.

Figure 15. Notation of Ice-T’s ‘The Coldest Rap (Part 2)’

Sound 2.8 Silva reading Figure 15.³⁰



³⁰ Of course, the reader can also refer to Ice-T’s performance to illustrate this point. I am including my own readings in this section as it is a little easier to compare versions when listening to the same unaccompanied voice (keeping the variables constant). The fact that I am reading from my notation demonstrates that my notation is accurate – because I know how to read music this is not a subjective activity but comparable to knowing how to read words on the page.

I am using the words ‘correct’ and ‘accurate’ intentionally. Unlike the act of identifying metre from the page, notating rhythms from performance has no element of subjectivity. At the beginning of this chapter I noted that we experience a poem differently to our neighbours. Elements of interpretation and meaning are subjective, however, the act of identifying a rhythm and notating it can only be done correctly or incorrectly. Understanding and using musical notation requires some musical education (just like transcribing words requires the listener to know how to read and write). Identifying beats from a performance is not a subjective exercise and does not require specialist musical education, only close listening. In the case of the Ice-T rap, the rhythmical differences between Attridge’s notation and what Ice-T actually performs are significant, whereas the differences between my notation (and performance) and Ice-T’s performance are negligible.³¹ My analysis of Attridge’s notation reveals that musical notation is sometimes appropriate for indicating the rhythms of poetry in performance. As with all kinds of notation, musical notation is only useful when it is accurate. Until the perfect software is developed it still relies on close listening.

In his study of hip hop aesthetics *To the Break of Dawn*, William Jelani Cobb states: ‘The primary question on the floor is what a given MC can do artistically within a 4/4 measure’ (84). Syncopation is a defining feature of rap – the skill and individuality of the rapper’s ‘live writing’ is heard in the way they work within the 4/4 bar but avoid always coinciding with the 4/4 beat. The originality of a rap is not the fact that it is in 4/4 time (they almost all are), but is found in the ways in which the rapper uses syncopation to navigate this time signature. This is not just a musical preference; it is a political move. Russell A. Potter writes that the history of African-American language and music ‘has been one of innumerable mixes, cuts, crosses, and influences’ and that revolutionary shifts in African-American music have been shaped via conscious resistance to commodification (69):

From the start, this double movement worked by syncope and *Signifyin(g)*, staging

³¹ Ice-T may not perform his rap with mechanical precision, but the difference is minute, and is the kind of expressiveness that all musicians demonstrate. For some artists, this slight, micro rhythmically offbeat feature is more prominent and is integral to their signature style. Joseph Patterson writes in an introduction to his interview with President T for *Complex magazine* (President T rose to fame with the Meridian Crew in 2003): ‘He was the one in the clique [Meridian Crew] whose offbeat, melodic cadence helped make them one of the most interesting entities in the scene at the time’. In the case of an artist such as President T, it would be important to note how impossible it is to precisely notate his ‘flow’ as he is always just offbeat and yet still within the time signature.

itself as difference, floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee. If European rhythm was resolutely 4/4, African-American music drew from West African polyrhythms and produced something new, not pure polyrhythms, but the undercurrent of the offbeat *against* 4/4 time: *syncopation* (70)

Culler comments that his students ‘have a surprisingly hard time hearing iambic pentameter without the practice of recitation, for instance, though they fare much better with four-beat rhythms’; an interesting observation, given that Culler seems to have a surprisingly hard time hearing syncopation within a four beat rhythm (173). Judging by their notation, Culler and Attridge appear to not be able to hear syncopation at all. By shifting the raps into a non-syncopated 4/4 rhythm, Culler and Attridge not only remove (through their notation) the rapper’s distinctive flow, but they also Westernise rap – in effect they make it white. In his essay Attridge aligns Auden and Britten’s ‘Night Mail’ with the Ice-T rap by pointing out (inaccurate) similarities in rhythm. He does this to seemingly elevate rap through the comparison, and to suggest that rap is nothing new as Britten and Auden were making ‘rap before rap’. Both objectives do not even attempt to understand the socio-political, or even purely musical properties of hip hop. Changing the artist’s ‘flow’ removes rap’s resistance to and play against European rhythm and metre and privileges white Western forms of music and poetry. Any conclusions drawn from this distorted notation are entirely inaccurate and pointless. A legacy of analysis of poetry based on the page rather than performance has contributed to established literary critics not having the tools required to be able to effectively discuss and analyse poetry in performance.

There is no definitive method of notating performed poetry. The methodology needs to be responsive to the particular poem and highlight the aspects the analyst wishes to discuss. Although notating pitch on a musical staff is only appropriate when a poem is sung, rhythmical musical notation is the most accurate and comprehensive way of indicating the rhythms of a performance that is in a particular time signature (for instance rap), but has the disadvantage of requiring the analyst and reader to be able to read music. When there is no need to recreate a rhythm from the page but the analyst wishes to comment on syncopation it is enough to indicate where the beat lands. If analysing speech or speech-like poetry delivery, notation used by phoneticians and discourse analysts might be appropriate. Pitch analysis programmes such as Drift can establish trends in delivery and indicate the broad intonation of a line. The

typographical and descriptive methods used by oral researchers can highlight particular aspects of a performance. Notation is particularly useful if a book is published without embedded or easily accessible audio clips. Studies of poetry performance might need to be downloadable in digital versions with embedded audio files. For this study I have produced a digital version with audio files and a print version (as required by the university) without the files. The print version still requires the reader to view online recordings of my case studies, however, without the short audio files my use of simple notation is essential and will help the reader understand my points alongside listening to the performances. If I were able to publish this only as a digital file I would still include notation for added clarity, to draw attention to the specific features of the performance I comment on.

This chapter reveals that it is not enough to recognise that poetry in performance is a neglected area and requires a new critical approach; we also need to ensure that in the process of analysis we do not replicate page-based models of analysis by working from a transcription rather than a recording. A transcription can help the analyst identify and clarify for their reader the features of the performance they wish to comment on, giving a visual representation which is often necessary when publishing criticism on the page. Established literary critics such as Attridge and Culler are recognising forms such as rap as part of poetry, and yet lifetime of performing metrical analysis from the page has impacted on how they listen and identify rhythm. This chapter reveals the challenges of various forms of notation and the difficulties of trusting software such as Drift and musical notation programmes over the human ear. Notation can be daunting, especially when it requires knowledge of how to read spectrograms or music, however, the object of study when analysing poetry performance is the poetry performance and not the notation. Sophisticated forms of notation are only useful when used accurately. In the case of this chapter, my use of musical notation alongside audio clips revealed the errors in Attridge's, Culler's and Novak's notations and that all three re-prioritise the page by analysing their transcriptions rather than the performances. However, Culler's and Attridge's simple way of identifying beats can be as useful as musical notation as long as it is accurate. Whatever the methodology used to transcribe poetry in performance, the analysis must be of the performance rather than the transcription. The analyst needs to listen again and again to the performance, rather than rely on their transcription and memory. It is more important to work on ways of listening than ways of notating. Just as someone analysing a poem on the page will read the poem over and over again,

scrutinising the details on the page, returning to particular lines, sometimes paying attention to lineation, sometimes re-reading to consider a particular word choice, a poetry performance needs to be watched and listened to multiple times, in multiple ways.

Chapter three

British Spoken Word Voice

This chapter accepts (for now) the premise that there is a particular kind of poetry in performance that can be identified as ‘spoken word’. It aims to identify recurring trends in the mode of delivery of ‘spoken word voice’. Although various articles refer to different kinds of ‘Poet Voice’, there are no existing analyses of the attributes of British spoken word voice. This chapter focuses on the intonation many poets use when delivering their poems and identifies patterns that recur throughout the delivery of a poem. As my focus is on identifying a general trend, this chapter does not discuss the details of vocal quality, meanings, content, context, physicality and other aspects of live writing. I begin by recounting ways in which poets describe the mode and their observations of why poets use it. I then notate the intonation of several poets using ‘Drift’ in order to see if the features are empirically identifiable (the spectrograms produced by Drift are an appendix to this chapter). This is followed by an exploration of why so many poets adopt ‘spoken word voice’, what its possible roots and heritages are, how it communicates in performance, and what it can tell us about live writing.

3.1 Introducing ‘British spoken word voice’

This chapter studies ‘British spoken word voice’, a delivery mode heard within poetry performances in the UK that are often described as ‘spoken word’. In my first chapter I discussed the problems around the use of the label ‘spoken word’ and the fact that many of the poets who others describe as ‘spoken word poets’ (or ‘artists’) do not describe themselves as such. However, the descriptor ‘spoken word’ is gaining considerable momentum. Although Apples and Snakes kept the ‘performance poetry’ descriptor for decades their new website states: ‘We positively encourage artists and producers to push the boundaries of what poetry and spoken word can be’. Their newly published online archive of their work over the last thirty-five years is entitled the ‘Spoken Word Archive’. It appears that ‘spoken word’ has replaced ‘performance poetry’ as the most popular term used to describe poets who are known as performers.

Niall O’Sullivan wrote an essay for his blog in 2014 entitled ‘Remembering the Death of Performance Poetry’ in which he tracks a shift from ‘performance poetry’ to ‘spoken

word'.³² Although many use the terms interchangeably, O'Sullivan suggests that 'performance poetry' was a 'distinctive style and approach'. His list of 'performance poets' includes John Cooper Clarke, Linton Kwesi Johnson, John Hegley, Jean "Binta" Breeze, Attila the Stockbroker, Benjamin Zephaniah, Patience Agbabi, Lemn Sissay and Murray Lachlan Young. O'Sullivan makes an interesting case for spoken word differing from performance poetry not only in terms of a generational difference, but also in style and influence. He writes that performance poets were inspired by 'the Beat poets, the Black Art Movement and the Liverpool Poets'. He suggests dub poetry can be seen as 'a separate line of inheritance' and comments that there 'was still a considerable literary aspect to their [performance poets'] work and their achievements were ultimately tied up with and signified by the books that they produced'. Although the privileging of the page suggested by the emphasis on books and the word choice 'ultimately' could be argued, the broad point O'Sullivan makes is that 'performance poets' had strong dual practices on the page and in performance, and diverse influences. He contrasts this with a younger 'spoken word' generation who he says are predominantly influenced by hip hop music. O'Sullivan references Polarbear and Scroobius Pip as having 'made their mark on the collective psyche during Spoken Word's beginnings' ('Remembering').³³ He does not state that spoken word poets have less interest in publishing on the page, although it is implied.

The inclusion of the word 'spoken' in the label 'spoken word', as well as the common use of the word 'artist' instead of 'poet' suggests a shift towards oral poetry and away from the page. The word 'artist' is commonly used within music, and 'spoken word artist' can be a broad descriptor that includes those who perform in music contexts as 'hip hop artists' as well as at literary and 'spoken word' events. O'Sullivan comments that he has not seen 'the same variety within a Spoken Word event' as he saw at performance poetry events, and observes: 'The worst Spoken Word, perhaps due to its relative stylistic uniformity, has not plumbed the depths of the worst of Performance Poetry'. O'Sullivan does not go into detail about what this 'stylistic uniformity' consists of. However, he has since written about 'Poet Voice', commenting that 'where the

³² O'Sullivan is a poet and the host of 'Poetry Unplugged', London's longest running poetry open mic.

³³ The distinctive features of spoken word voice can be heard in Polarbear's performances as well as Kate Tempest's and Joelle Taylor's, all of whom have had an influence on other poets, not only due to their performing careers and online profiles, but also in person through their educational work; Polarbear led the Roundhouse collective for many years, and Joelle Taylor is renowned for her work with young people through 'SLAMBassadors'.

literary Poet Voice is distinct by its lack of passion, Spoken Word Poet Voice emulates passion without eliciting it' ('Why Every Poet').

The descriptor 'Poet Voice' is used in various contexts to refer to different dominant modes of delivery, including American slam, American 'academic' delivery and British spoken word. In her article 'Flock Mentality: Why Poets Need to Think for Themselves' Lisa Marie Basile comments: 'There is one tangible insincerity in poetry: Poet Voice'. Her reference to MFA programmes suggests that she is referring to an American academic mode, the same mode analysed by MacArthur who describes it as 'monotonous incantation' ('Monotony'). Rich Smith seems to be describing the same kind of voice in his article 'Stop Using "Poet Voice"', in which he describes a 'soft, airy reading style' heard in the US. However, Vermeersch, a few years earlier refers to American spoken word ('slam voice') rather than the 'academic' mode in his online article, 'Why I hate spoken word poetry', a self-confessed 'rant' that picks up on a 'forced' mode of delivery: 'So banal, so bromidic, is this doggerel that the "performer" must jazz it up with all kinds of forced rhythms and hand signals to make it "entertaining" enough for an audience'. Jesse Donaldson interviews the linguist Lindsay Alley for *Vice Magazine*, who identifies what 'slam voice' (American spoken word voice) is and why it 'annoys' so many poets and audience members.³⁴ Alley comments that 'slam voice' is:

pitched higher than regular speech. There's also a repetition of pitch patterns and rhythms. It's an unnatural-sounding pattern, and it tends to recur throughout the performance without necessarily being informed by the content.

American academic poets sound similar to each other (as MacArthur identifies), American slam poets often sound like each other, and British spoken word poets also often perform in a distinctive mode. The features of British spoken word voice have roots in slam poetry in the United States, where the delivery mode has become steadily more consistent since slam began in the eighties.³⁵ The issue is not that every poet writing every kind of poetry in every country sounds the same, but that communities of poets have a tendency to sound like each other; these similarities can be found in the

³⁴ Taylor Mali parodies American slam poet voice perfectly in his performance 'I Could Be A Poet'.

³⁵ In our interview Salena Godden comments that she first encountered 'that voice' when she went to New York once a year with the poet Tim Wells, to perform at famous slam venues such as the Nuyorican.

intonation, often accompanied by elements such as pauses, use of breath and gesture. Although the particular features of the modes are different, the various prevalent modes have similarities.

To vastly generalise: American spoken word (or ‘slam voice’) is characterised by its high pitch, rising intonation at the ends of phrases and distinctive phrasing. British spoken word voice is similar but is characterised by falling intonation at the ends of phrases. Both modes are often delivered in a cracked, emotional (‘authentic’) sounding voice, but this is a less constant feature and not one of the aspects I focus on in this chapter. The American ‘academic’ reading style is very similar to the British ‘avant-garde’ style (in the United States, ‘academic’ is often synonymous with ‘avant-garde’). Both modes are characterised by their narrow intonation range.

The comment by Lindsay Alley, that a distinctive pattern, ‘tends to recur throughout the performance without necessarily being informed by the content’, is echoed by MacArthur who uses pitch-tracking software to identify the features of prosody heard in ‘contemporary academic poetry reading’ in the United States (‘Monotony’ 38).³⁶ In chapter one I discuss Charles Bernstein’s dislike of ‘theatrical’ poetry readings and his preference for a ‘minimally inflected’ mode of performance (11). As MacArthur comments, the academic mode she analyses is the mode preferred by Bernstein (an American academic). MacArthur identifies a ‘repetitive cadence’ that ‘has the effect of attuning the listener to the cadence rather than the semantics of a poem’ (54). MacArthur identifies ‘monotonous incantation’ in the following way:

Monotonous incantation is characterized by three qualities: (1) the repetition of a falling cadence within a narrow range of pitch; (2) a flattened affect that suppresses idiosyncratic expression of subject matter in favor of a restrained, earnest tone; and (3) the subordination of conventional intonation patterns dictated by particular syntax, and of the poetic effects of line length and line breaks, to the prevailing cadence and slow, steady pace. (44)

The recurring feature of all kinds of Poet Voice is distinctive intonation. Intonation is

³⁶ The poets MacArthur analyses as examples of this academic ‘monotonous incantation’ mode are Louise Glück (‘Witchgrass’), Michael Ryan (‘Outside’) and Natasha Trethewey (‘Monument’).

included within the definition of speech ‘prosody’ outlined in the previous chapter (Kreiman and Sidtis 261). Marit MacArthur appears to be the only academic who has analysed intonation in respect to a particular poetry delivery mode. British spoken word voice is quite different to the American academic reading style MacArthur studies, however, it can be characterised by focusing on similar features. British spoken word voice also uses a ‘narrow range of pitch’ (until the end of phrases) and disrupts ‘conventional intonation patterns dictated by particular syntax [...] to the prevailing cadence’. Spoken word voice is not characterised by a ‘slow, steady pace’, or by a ‘restrained’ tone. Although it also has the ‘repetition of a falling cadence’, the falling tones of spoken word voice tend to be over a far wider pitch range.

Musicians learn their instruments by practising scales, arpeggios, and playing studies. Actors can follow methods established by Stanislavski, Grotowski, Lecoq or many others. Within poetry performance there are no such codified methods of training. Some poets attend workshops and learn through exploring performance in related fields, others learn through emulation and imitation and remain performing in the style of others, or begin with imitation and then develop their own approaches. In our interview Sam-La Rose discusses the importance of discipline and having ‘a practice’ but that poets need to figure out what that means to them, rather than practising ‘whatever the poetic equivalent of scales would be’. For Sam-La Rose it is important to challenge the poets he works with to figure out what they have to contribute, ‘so that an understanding of a black British voice within poetry can be complicated and detailed in some way, not locked down and defined, but so we can appreciate the depth of it’. There are only a few longer courses for poets interested in honing their craft – for instance Goldsmiths College’s ‘The Spoken Word Educators Programme’ pioneered by Chicago based poet Peter Kahn in collaboration with Jacob Sam-La Rose.³⁷ ‘The Writing Squad’, an ensemble for young writers in the North directed by Steve Dearden includes workshops on many aspects of writing craft with visiting writers and ‘core team’ writers including Malika Booker.

Kayo Chingonyi points out that imitation is a common way that hip hop artists and rappers learn their craft, before finding their own ‘flow’, and that this was how he started out too, before developing his own style (interview). In his study of the poetics

³⁷ Sam-La Rose also works with young poets through organisations including Apples and Snakes, the Roundhouse and the Barbican.

of hip hop Adam Bradley points out that although hip hop is learnt through imitation, ‘out of that imitation, innovation is often born’ (140). Spoken word is often linked with hip hop; many spoken word poets also perform as hip hop or grime artists (Kate Tempest, Isaiah Hull, Deborah Stevenson). The influence of hip hop, rap and grime (in London and the United States) may have contributed to the rising tones of the U.S. slam Poet Voice being replaced by the falling tones heard in British spoken word voice. Slight falling tones at the ends of phrases, and the same pitch (often on rhyming words) at the end of phrases can be heard in grime and hip hop (for instance in Skepta’s track ‘Shutdown’). Repetitive use of the same pitch at the end of each phrase, or ‘tone concord’ can be seen as a form of rhyme in itself – the intonation, as well as (and sometimes instead of) the word ‘rhymes’.

Within hip hop and grime, individuality and originality are celebrated. As grime artist President T says in an interview with ‘Hamda’:

Grime is about being unique, sticking to what you know, having your own flow and never adopting the sound of anyone else. It’s originality. There’s no point trying to replicate another MC’s flow. (‘President T Talks Prison, Punks and Endless Possibility’)

Intonation is a key element of ‘flow’. Hip hop performers tend to have more varied ‘flows’ than spoken word poets. Kate Tempest uses ‘spoken word voice’ when performing without a beat and musicians (as can be heard in a recording of her performing at ‘Hold Your Own’ in Glastonbury), and a more varied ‘flow’ when working with musicians, as can be heard in her performance of ‘War Music (After Logue)’ with improvising musicians. Originality and ‘authenticity’ are celebrated within spoken word as much as within hip hop and grime, which seems at odds with the fact that the spoken word voice (or ‘flow’) is often so uniform.

In “Ways of Listening” I discuss the challenges of notating the pitch of speech. Speech is microtonal, meaning that it often does not fall on tones and semitones, but on pitches in between. Drift identifies frequency in Hertz and provides contour lines that show how the pitch/frequency of speech moves up and down (the intonation). It also provides amplitude graphs of the sound waves, giving an indication of the intensity of the word and its volume. I focus on the contour lines as they demonstrate that a fall in pitch at the

end of phrases in spoken word voice is quantifiable.³⁸ Frequency is more precise than pitch, however, pitch is useful as I can identify it by ear and my interest is in what we *hear* when we listen to poetry, rather than something that only a programme can identify. I translate the frequency into pitch and describe the interval of falling pitch to give a clearer sense of the extent of the fall. My ears do not always confirm the pitches indicated by Drift (perhaps in part due to the difficulty of hearing tone from speech rather than song, and perhaps due to some inaccuracies of the software), however, if there are inaccuracies in terms of frequency/pitch this does not impact on my conclusions. The spectrograms are helpful as they reveal the consistent dips in frequency/pitch at the ends of phrases. Although I talk about frequencies and pitch in this chapter, the main reason for using these measurements and the graphs is to provide a visual picture of the extent of falling pitch at the ends of phrases. The shape of the contour and steepness of the curve provides enough information to identify trends, and empirically confirms what the ear can tell us; the precise frequencies are less important.

I suggest that the most prominent characteristics of ‘British spoken word voice’ are as follows:

- a. Consistent use of falling tones at the end of every phrase.**
- b. A narrow range of pitch, clustering around a high tone (before ending the phrase with the falling tone).**
- c. Phrasing that disrupts syntax.**

David J, Salena Godden and Lemn Sissay do not use ‘British spoken word voice’ (or any single mode of delivery). I include analyses of David J’s, Godden’s and Sissay’s delivery in this chapter to contrast with the examples of spoken word voice and to demonstrate that they cannot be described as performing in any single kind of Poet Voice. One of the best known poets often described as a ‘spoken word poet’ is Kate Tempest. In an article for *The Telegraph* Alice Vincent describes her as ‘a darling of the spoken-word poetry world’. Critics in the mainstream press often suggest that Tempest

³⁸ Drift has a feature that lines words up with the amplitude/frequency, however this stopped functioning half way through my work on this chapter. From Spectrogram 7 onwards I have written in the text myself, and it is not lined up with the audio in the same way as the earlier examples. I have been in communication with the Robert Ochshorn, who designed Drift however we have not been able to resolve this yet. He and MacArthur are in the process of applying for further funding to develop the application. I have included some audio files along with the transcriptions however please also refer to the full recordings.

is a pioneer; David Bennun, reviewing her performance at the Brighton Fringe (which Tempest programmed in 2017) for the *Guardian* comments that no other performance poet is in the same ‘league’. Natasha Tripney, writing for *The Stage* agrees that ‘few performance poets’ can ‘fill the room in any way like the way she can’.³⁹ The reviewers tend not to mention that her work draws on a rich heritage of performance poetry; her hip hop influenced poetry and music often draws its subject matter from Greek mythology, but its rhythms, sounds and swag have roots in African American, Caribbean and black British cultures, through dub, reggae, jazz and African American and Caribbean modes of preaching. A long chain of emulation and inspiration has contributed to Tempest’s performance style.

3.2 Notating features of spoken word voice using Drift

a) Consistent use of falling tones at the end of every phrase.

In this section I use Drift to analyse the falling intonation heard at the end of phrases in Tempest’s 2013 performance of ‘Renegade’. The recording is intended for film rather than live performance (it is a clean sound recording which makes it suitable to use with Drift). Tempest’s use of spoken word voice is heard across contexts, whether performing for film or for a live audience (although the pitch range of the falling tones is usually wider in live performances). I do not notate the entire poem; in order to hear the extent of the use of falling tones it is necessary to listen to the recording alongside this analysis.

Consider the first three phrases (the first three lines in the page version) of ‘Renegade’. Spectrogram 1 reveals Tempest’s falling pitch tones. We can hear and see the falling tone as Tempest says ‘renegade’, ‘truth’ and ‘rooftops’. According to Drift the frequency range of the falling tone on ‘renegade’ goes from 345 Hertz to 220 Hertz. Converted to pitch this is approximately an F above middle C falling to the A below middle C, which is a fifth. The next line has a falling tone of about a minor third, the

³⁹ A Google search for ‘Kate Tempest blonde curls’ produces a boggling number of results. *The Standard*, *Financial Times*, *Spectator*, *List*, *Time Out* and the *New York Times* all mention her locks, which suggests a fetishising of whiteness in predominantly black cultural spaces that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

third line ‘rooftops’ moves from 350-260Hz (an interval of about a fourth). These intervals can be confirmed by ear. The repeated falling tones at the end of each phrase create parallel phrasing and tone concord. The falling tones are particularly pronounced in words of more than one syllable, such as the double, chain rhymes of ‘breathing’/‘weeping’/ ‘grieving’/‘feeling’. The use of tone concord, in which the falling tones heard on the rhyming words have the same (or very close) pitches and intervals, can be seen as another strand of rhyme. We can hear this in the following:

a world that is breathing
heaving its shoulders and weeping
bleeding through open wounds that’s why I’m grieving
I’m down on my knees and I am feeling everything I’m feeling

Spectrograms 2, 3, and 4 reveal that the words ‘breathing’, ‘weeping’, ‘bleeding’, ‘grieving’, ‘feeling’ and ‘feeling’ are delivered with roughly the same interval of falling tone (between a third and a fourth). ‘Breathing’ has a falling tone of 355Hz (slightly higher than an F) down to 270Hz (slightly lower than C sharp). An F to a C sharp is a diminished fourth. In fact the interval is slightly smaller as the voice is not landing on tones. My ears hear it as a major third. I also hear a major third on ‘shoulders’ and ‘weeping’. ‘Grieving’ has a slightly larger interval of about a fourth. The intonation contours reveal that the falling tone is pronounced and is of a similar interval throughout.

Spectrograms 5 and 6 show that her intonation across the phrase: ‘so come here, give me your hand, because I know how to hold it’ demonstrates particularly pronounced falling tones, over a wider interval, as Tempest builds to a climax. Her tone on the word ‘here’ falls by about a fifth, from about G sharp to C sharp; ‘hand’ falls by about a fourth, G to D; ‘hold it’ falls on the same pitches again from about G to D. The same pronounced falling tones at the ends of phrases are heard throughout this poem and Tempest’s other solo performances. Spectrograms 7-9 reveal that the instances of downward inflection increase as she reaches the climax/conclusion of the poem [4:39-4:57]:

We’re not flesh, we’re all energy.
I care about genius

I don't care about celebrity
Don't give a shit about the hype
I really care about integrity.
I mean you only build them up to burn their effigies, anyway.
And me, I'm getting closer to my essence every day.
Renegade.

Sound 3.1: “And me? [...] Renegade.” (‘Renegade’)



Tempest rhymes through tone concord, syllable number, and by using the same pitches and falling tones: ‘energy’ ‘celebrity’ ‘integrity’ ‘effigies’ ‘anyway’ ‘every day’ and ‘renegade’ all have distinctive falling tones (Spectrograms 7-9). They are also all triplets – in the musical terminology, or ‘dactyls’ in metrical. Spectrogram 9 shows the final falling tones, ‘everyday’ (about an F down to B flat, a diminished 5th) and ‘Renegade’ (F sharp down to A, an augmented 5th).

According to Wells, the nuclear word (a linguistic term that refers to the word containing the main accent at the end of a phrase) is generally a ‘content word’ (a term used in linguistics to refer to a word with high information content – usually nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs – also called *lexical words*) (97). According to this we would expect that the words carrying the main accent, (which in this case are the words with strong downwards inflection and rhymes at the end of each phrase) would be content words and many of Tempest’s are: “genius”, “celebrity”, “hype”, “integrity”. However, there are also instances of the downwards intonation falling on non-content rhymed words, which is a feature of hip hop, such as more/raw/before, and in this multisyllabic chain rhyme: | you mate/too late/too it/mean it | – in which the repetition of two syllables at the end of each phrase in itself provides a kind of rhyme, in addition to the full and near rhymes, and assonance and consonance, in particular with the [t] sound. As Adam Bradley explains, chain rhymes are ‘extended runs of the same rhyme sound over a series of lines, often with both end and internal rhymes [and] have become

increasingly popular among MCs in recent years' (51).

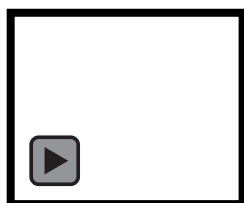
'Renegade' also demonstrates the second distinctive feature of spoken word voice:

b) A narrow range of pitch, clustering around a high tone (before ending the phrase with the falling tone).

Linguists describe patterns in which the pitch and rhythmic characteristics differ from 'ordinary patterns' as 'stylized patterns' (Wells 240). 'Renegade' is almost entirely delivered around a cluster of tones between 350 to 400 Hertz. That is roughly F-G (above middle C), an interval of only a tone. It starts around an F, shifting up to around the G as the poem builds (Spectrograms 1-9). The average fundamental frequency of female voices is 220Hz (the A below middle C). Listening to 'Kate Tempest Interview' (filmed for the Next Generation Poets publicity) reveals that Tempest's natural speaking voice conforms to this average, around 196-220Hz. Tempest performs at up to seven tones above this. In much spoken word the pitch is kept at a high-stylised tone without specific emphasis until the accentuated falling tone at the end of each phrase.

In Tempest's live performance of 'Hold Your Own' the attributes of spoken word voice are accentuated as she is projecting her voice to a big crowd on an outdoors stage at Glastonbury. Her high-stylised pitch is higher and her falling tones are more pronounced. She consistently uses falling tones on the refrain 'Hold your own' (an interval of about a fifth). Drift is not able to process the sound file effectively due to the noise on the file, but they can be heard by ear:

Sound 3.2 "When time pulls lives apart, hold your own" ('Hold Your Own')

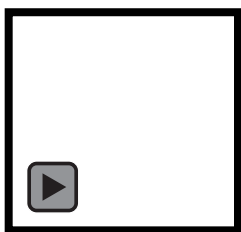


There are also similarities in the content of the lines. Here the falling tones are heard in both instances of the word 'feeling' (and also on 'everything', 'knowing' and 'feel'):

Sound 3.3 “I am feeling everything I’m feeling” (‘Renegade’)

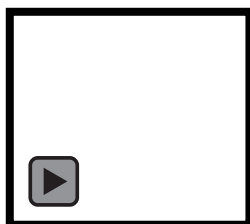


Sound 3.4 “knowing that you feel what you are feeling” (‘Hold Your Own’)



O’Sullivan observes: ‘The difference between the poet’s natural speaking voice and their Poet Voice often says something about their ideas of poetry and how it contrasts or compliments natural speech’ (‘Why Every Poet’). Tempest has a grand, preacher- like declamatory style, giving the sense that she wishes her message to reach hundreds of people. Although the features of this style are accentuated when she performs live, the fact that they are apparent in this example of ‘Renegade’ as well as ‘Hold Your Own’ demonstrate that they are consistent features of her spoken word voice. If we listen to Tempest speaking in an interview context it is clear how stylised her delivery in performance is. Comparing the performance mode to her speech mode helps highlight the attributes of spoken word voice. Here is a transcription of Tempest talking about her work for an interview for the Next Generation Poets (see Spectrograms 10-12 ‘Kate Tempest Interview’).

Sound 3.5 “One part me thinks [...] and I wrote lyrics” ‘Kate Tempest Interview’



“One part of me thinks... I’ve `always... `known it and wanted to `do it and felt that

it was `happening kind of whether or not I wanted to ... ~write poetry I was already involved in `writing ´poetry but another part of me thinks I´m not even, I´m not´there yet, I´m not even ...a ´poet.” (‘Kate Tempest Interview’)

To complement the spectrograms I have indicated rising (´), falling (˘) and fall-rising tones (˘´) following conventions of notation in linguistics. Tempest does not speak with a wide pitch range; her speech has a range of about three tones clustering around the G below middle C (196Hz), using many microtones between and never staying on one pitch. The distinctive falling tone of her poetry rendition is not present at all in her speech. She does not use an increased dynamic to emphasise her points. Her speech flows, she does not emphasise thoughts at the end of each sentence as she does at the end of each line/phrase of poetry, but immediately picks up her narrative. Where tones are identifiable they are subtle, mostly rising tones and fall-rises, indicating there is more to come. None of the thoughts here are presented as distinct and complete, in strong contrast to the intonation she uses in performance.

For Tempest, the intonation is a feature of the line; it serves to heighten the lines, and makes her delivery in performance very different to her ‘daily’ way of speaking. As O’Sullivan points out, all poets use a slightly different delivery mode when they are reading their poems (‘Why Every Poet’). A delivery mode becomes recognisable as a ‘Poet Voice’ when it is used consistently throughout the poem and heard in all performances by the poet.

More examples of falling tones at the end of phrases can be heard in Indigo Williams’ performances of her poem ‘Dark Black’ [0:11-1:33]. Her falling tones are less pronounced than Tempest’s, but as Spectrograms 13 and 14 (‘Confounding Stereotypes’) reveal, it is the same feature of spoken word voice.

Sound 3.6 “Your Aunt Sharice [...] cream” (‘Confounding Stereotypes’)



Sound 3.7 “It had different degrees [...] yours” (‘Confounding Stereotypes’)



Spectrogram 14 reveals falling tones within the line as well as at the ends of her phrases. Williams uses falling tones on ‘degrees’, ‘shame’ and ‘Yours’ and throughout the poem. There are falling tones on the following words at about the following intervals (assessed by ear): ‘bleaching cream’ (about a fifth), ‘saying’ (second), ‘burning’ (third), ‘understand this’ (fourth), ‘dark skinned’ (second), ‘colour’ (second), ‘shame’ (minor third), ‘yours’ (fifth), ‘ground’ (minor third) ‘dirt’ (second), ‘[It was] then’ (third), ‘each shade’ (minor third), ‘rejection’ (fourth). Occasionally the falling intonation could be connected to Williams’ slight Nigerian accent (this is apparent in the line ‘of your burning’ where the final syllable is very short). A comparison of her delivery of the poem with her introduction (Spectrogram 15) reveals that she usually uses rising rather than falling tones when she is not performing her poetry.

Sound 3.8 “My name is [...] today” (‘Confounding Stereotypes’)



“My name is Indigo Williams. I’m a poet and spoken word educator. And I’m going to be sharing two poems with you all today.” (‘Confounding stereotypes’)

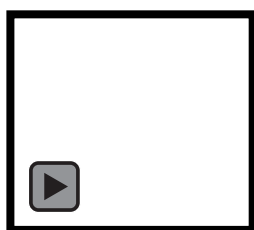
In her introduction Williams uses distinctive rising tones, described by linguists as ‘upspeak’ and ‘uptalk’ (Sound 3.8; Spectrogram 15). Uptalk is heard throughout the English speaking world, particular among younger generations (Wells 37). It signals ‘neither continuation nor questioning’ but is a ‘new prosodic trend’ (Kreiman and Sidtis 272). It has uncertain origins, there is speculation it originated in New Zealand but

others claim Australia, California and even British regional accents as the source (Wells 37). The intonation of Williams' speech is completely different to her intonation in performance. It may be that Williams is simply and perhaps unconsciously using two different but equally familiar and automatic prosodic trends, the 'upspeak' of speech and the falling tones of British spoken word.⁴⁰

To reveal how stylised and distinctive the falling tones of British spoken word voice are, we can compare with the intonation of poets who do not perform in spoken word voice. Spectrogram 16 is a reproduction of Marit MacArthur's notation of the American 'uncreative writer' Kenneth Goldsmith's poem 'Traffic' (using a similar pitch tracking tool, 'ARLO'). If this were performed in spoken word voice we would expect to see falling (rather than sustained) tones on 'Right now' 'tunnel' and 'road work'.

Spectrogram 17 shows an extract from 'This is What We Do' in which David J uses sudden pitch drops. This sounds quite different to the falling intonation of spoken word voice. David J uses some of the features of 'spoken word voice' as one of his delivery modes. He delivers the extract shown in Spectrogram 14 on a high-stylised tone (around 270 Hz), then suddenly drops down to about 70Hz. Due to the way it displays amplitude, Drift does not indicate clearly the difference between a sliding fall and the sudden drop in pitch heard in David J's performance (listening to the extract (Sound 3.9) reveals the sudden drop):

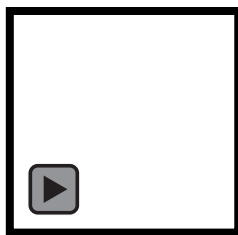
Sound 3.9 "A lot of people [...] testicle" ('This is What We Do')



⁴⁰ The falling tones of British spoken word voice can be heard in almost all of the Roundhouse Poetry slam Youtube videos (Caleb Femi's 'Children of the Narm' (winner in 2015), Hibaq Osman (winner in 2012), Maria Ferguson's performance of 'You gave it to me for my 21st' (at the 2014 slam) and in performances by the Mouthy Poets, for instance Midnight Shelley's poem 'The Kid I Am').

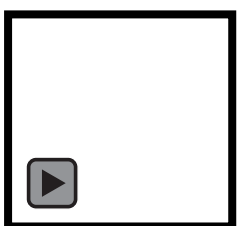
David J constantly switches between delivery modes. In the following example from ‘This is What We Do’ [1:21-1:33] he moves from a conversational, story-telling mode of delivery (with varied intonation moving around 110-250 Hz) to a brief declamatory mode (the high-stylised tone used in spoken word voice, at just over 300 Hz), then back down to around 100-110Hz returning to a conversational mode (he tells himself off with “come on David continue” “I will”). Drift picks up on the background noises and provides a line in the annotation of frequency where there are pauses in David J’s performance (Spectrogram 18). Listening to the audio clarifies the transcription.

Sound 3.10 “Jacob’s crackers [...] I will” (‘This is What We Do’)



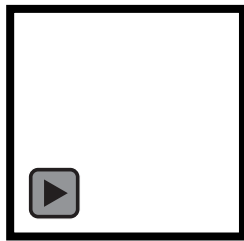
Spectrogram 19 shows an extract of Lemn Sissay’s performance of ‘Gold from the Stone’ at Porchester Hall [3:01-3:16]. He uses a variety of vocal qualities in this extract, and does not use falling intonation. When he uses drops in intonation, these are sudden drops to a lower pitch on ‘stone’ and ‘earth’ rather than tapering falls on the words. The transcription shows us that Sissay is not using the distinctive falling tones of spoken word voice, but cannot indicate his use of breath and voice. The audio clip reveals he uses distinctive breath patterns and vocal qualities, extending the consonants of words and almost singing some tones. In this instance the intonation contours reveal little about the sounds of the performance although the amplitude (indicated at the top of the diagrams) shows the rhythm and dynamics of the delivery, including the way Sissay gives the same dynamic and duration to ‘I’ ‘yearned’ ‘for’ ‘my’, and his repetition and intensity of the delivery of the word ‘home’.

Sound 3.11 “Gold from the stone [...] birth” (‘Lemn Sissay performs’)



Spectrogram 20 ('Soapbox loves') shows a clip from Salena Godden's poem 'Imagine if you had to lick it!' Listening to the audio clip (Sound 3.12), we can hear that she moves from a proclaiming tone with 'Three day old vomit on the pavement!' to her 'Darth Vader' voice for 'imagine if you had to lick it'. Again, Drift does not reveal the main features of Godden's performance, and struggles to pick up the frequency of 'imagine if you had to lick it' in which she uses her 'Darth Vader' breathy, gravelly voice. However, it does reveal that she is not speaking with the distinctive falling patterns of spoken word voice.

Sound 3.12 "Three day old [...] lick it" ('Soapbox loves')



Drift reveals trends in delivery when those trends are distinctive and repetitive. It can reveal the ways in which poets do not 'write live' in performance, but follow a popular use of intonation and syntax that is not responsive to the context or the specific poem. It is useful when analysing large batches of audio files in order to reveal trends (as Marit J MacArthur uses it to analyse an American 'academic' mode, and as I have used it in this chapter to analyse 'British Spoken Word Voice'). However, when a poet does not speak in a distinct and stylised pattern, Drift does not give us much information. It cannot indicate the nuances of timing, intonation and the vocal qualities that David J, Godden and Sissay play with in their performances (and also ignores the use of body and stage space). Because all three vary their use of voice and delivery mode to such extents, Drift is not a useful tool with which to analyse their performances, but it does reveal how varied and non-repetitive their delivery styles are.

c) Phrasing that disrupts syntax

The third distinctive feature of 'British spoken word voice' is phrasing that disrupts syntax. It can be identified when the poet does not pause or breathe in a place dictated by syntax but in unexpected places, tacking the start of a new thought or phrase onto the

end of the previous one before pausing. We can hear phrasing that disrupts syntax in Jess Green's popular poem 'Dear Mr Gove' (which went viral on Youtube). Green inserts quick breaths in places that interrupt the syntax, for instance she pauses after (rather than before) 'all' here: 'I set a picture of you Mr Gove as the background on my phone all [breath] pressed up and pouting'; and after (rather than before) the conjunction 'and' here: 'with forty-five minutes left to go and [breath] not one member of year eleven has taken off their coats'. Green's poem also demonstrates falling tones (on fingers/scabs/ inside/went in/ mother/grandmother) and her 'high-stylised' tone is so pronounced she is almost singing on one note (consistently landing on middle C (261.63Hz), which is several tones above the average fundamental frequency for women. As in Green's poem, phrasing that disrupts syntax usually occurs when a pause is inserted after (rather than before) words that in standard grammar would usually start a new clause, such as pronouns and conjunctions.

As my work leading workshops and judging the UniSlam confirms, this third element of British spoken word voice is consistently heard in the performances of poets throughout the U.K.⁴¹ When I worked as a director on a project '10 Letters' in Birmingham, many of the poets had this feature of their delivery. For instance a poem by Aliyah Denton on the page is as follows⁴²:

at 2am I notice that the walls are lined with fabric.
They're kind of red and dotted with hints of black ink.
Now between these four walls is where I really

Before we worked on the delivery, Denton performed the above using the following phrasing:

at 2am I notice that the walls are lined with fabric they're.
Kind of red and dotted with hints of black ink now.
Between these four walls is where I really

⁴¹ The UniSlam is a yearly festival and competition during which slam teams from universities throughout the UK and Ireland compete and attend workshops and masterclasses. I have worked with slam teams from Durham University (through The Writing Squad, 2019) and Birmingham University (2017) and gave a masterclass on spoken word voice at the 2017 slam in Leicester (and was also one of the judges). I heard 'British spoken word voice' in the performances of poets from across the U.K. including Scotland, confirming that it is not specific to region or accent.

⁴² Based on the unpublished version of the poem that I worked on with Denton.

Ending the phrase with ‘now’ suggests that the walls are *now* dotted with hints of black. Placing ‘now’ at the beginning of the following phrase is more conversational and connotes the beginning of a new thought. My preference is for the way Denton first intended it; if she pauses after ‘hints of black ink’, the listener has more space and opportunity to visualise the wallpaper before the next thought. I learned that Denton was nervous about allowing pauses and silences, and that this was behind her tendency to tack the beginning of a line onto the end of the previous line before breathing. When I directed the poet Shagufta Iqbal for an Apples and Snakes national tour (‘Public Address III’), she told me she thought she (and others) grouped lines in this way to ensure the audience knows there is more to come. This may be the case, however, I have heard this phrasing consistently used by poets from across the UK, and it seems more likely due to imitation and habit rather than fear of silence.

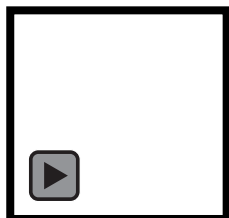
Phrasing that disrupts syntax can be heard in a poem by Caleb Femi, who is the 2017 ‘Young People’s Laureate for London’ and one of the judges for the 2018 Out-Spoken poetry prize. Femi’s Roundhouse Poetry Slam winning poem ‘Children of the ’Narm’ is about his experiences growing up in Peckham in the nineties. In an interview for *Okay Africa* he tells Alyssa Klein that he moved to North Peckham from Nigeria when he was seven years old. He explains the title and the context of his poem:

The children of the ’Narm are children and young people who grew up in Peckham during the 90s, 00s and even today. They are children who come from Africa and the Caribbean, who live or lived in the estates or houses in and around Peckham. ’Narm derives from the word Peckham. During the early 2000s, children that lived in the estates decided to give Peckham the name ‘Vietnam’ to draw parallels between the high knife and gun crime culture they experienced and the warlike environment of the Vietnam War. The name soon transformed into ‘Pecknarm’ which is a merging of Peckham and Vietnam. Eventually, that was cut down to ’Narm.

Femi performs at a pitch around the dynamic of his speaking voice, and consistently uses falling intonation at the ends of phrases. He has not yet published ‘Children of the ’Narm’ on the page (his website indicates he is working on a pamphlet). I include sound clips alongside indications of how Femi phrases his delivery in ways that disrupt syntax in the first minute of his performance at the Roundhouse slam. In each example Femi

disrupts the syntax of the line by inserting a breath after rather than before the word that syntactically separates two clauses.

Sound 3.13 “Freetown [... came and realised” (‘Nigerian poet’)



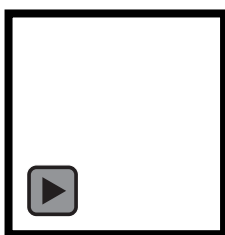
“Jos, Freetown and Yamoussoukro who (*breath*) came and realised that the”

Sound 3.14 “stories but [...] here now” (‘Nigerian poet’)



“stories but didn’t even mind because (*breath*) we were here now with our”

Sound 3.15 “lyrics [...]’Narm” (‘Nigerian poet’)



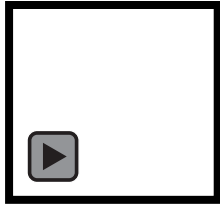
“lyrics on the following Monday straight to school whilst (*breath*) letting our Native songs escape on the Estuarine wind we are the children of the ’Narm”

Sound 3.16 “only [...] altogether” (‘Nigerian poet’)



“only in subdued decibels until (*breath*) some of us had forgotten it altogether”

Sound 3.17 “who were [...] the times” (‘Nigerian poet’)



“who were scolded by teachers because (*breath*) the anecdotes we told of the times”

Femi continues using this distinctive phrasing pattern throughout his poem, consistently phrasing his performance in a way that disrupts syntax, illustrating the third distinctive feature of British spoken word voice.

3.3 Why poets use spoken word voice

When teaching a workshop for Apples and Snakes I was surprised that the poet who demonstrated the most distinctive example of British spoken word voice was also the least experienced and least confident performer. This mode is not necessarily something that poets are falling into after many years of performing, but can be the default pattern that they begin with. In her interview with Jesse Donaldson, the linguist and poet Lindsay Alley made a similar observation, commenting there is ‘a tendency toward uniformity that’s more prominent than in other art forms’ and suggests this is because of the pressure of competing in slams where poets do not get ‘any specific or useful criticism’ therefore they ‘might reach for what other people are doing that works’. Chris Gilpin agrees, pointing out that slam participants and even those who do not compete ‘copy the most obvious elements of performance cliché’ in order to be ‘taken seriously as a slam poet’. The point also applies outside of the slam context. Adopting the intonation of spoken word voice gave the poet in my workshop confidence. Her poem *sounded* like the poems performed by established spoken word poets. In our interview Lemn Sissay uses the description ‘one note’ to refer to a delivery mode that it is particularly common amongst young poets: ‘you find their voices always doing the

same thing whatever they're talking about'. This chimes with O'Sullivan's observation of a younger generation performing with 'stylistic uniformity', and Lindsay Alley's observation that the prosodic features of 'slam voice' tend to 'recur throughout the performance without necessarily being informed by the content' (Donaldson). All three of the features of spoken word voice are heard with such consistent 'uniformity' that they are clearly unrelated to the content of the poems.

For many, spoken word voice is automatic; O'Sullivan observes that it is a sign 'that the reader is in autopilot mode' ('Why Every Poet'). Jan Mukařovský, part of The Prague School of functional linguistics (the heritage of Russian formalism), discusses foregrounding in his essay 'Standard Language and Poetic Language'.

In poetic language foregrounding achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background as the objective of expression and of being used for its own sake; it is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself. (45)

The notion of 'foregrounding' usually applies to distinctive features such as an unusual use of voice. We might assume that the distinctive intonation patterns and phrasing of spoken word voice would be foregrounded. However, once a distinctive pattern is used consistently it is no longer foregrounded but is in accord 'with the automatized poetic canon', as Mukařovský writes:

it is possible in some cases for a component which is foregrounded in terms of the norms of the standard, not to be foregrounded in a certain work because it is in accord with the automatized poetic canon. (46)

Mukařovský comments 'the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed' (19). In an email, poet Jemima Foxtrot (who I worked with briefly on her show *Above the Mealy-Mouthed Sea*) confirms this:

I had absolutely no idea I was using 'poet voice' [...] when we sat down with the script I noticed that, yes, I was pausing in completely weird places and letting an unnatural rhythm carry me away without thinking enough about the meaning behind the words.

Foxtrot's use of the phrase 'carry me away' suggests that for a performer, automatised spoken word voice feels like being lulled by a particular rhythm, which is what Sissay describes in our interview with a metaphor of a snake charmer:

The poet becomes a snake charmer, but the snake starts to hypnotise the poet [...] so you find their voices always doing the same thing whatever they're talking about. (*sung*) They are becoming hypnotised by the snake. They think they are the people hypnotising and it's not it's the other way around. When I hear intonation that takes away from the poem, they are now hypnotised, in their comfort zone.

When a poet has remembered something musically, they can perform on autopilot, however, if they lose concentration midway through they will usually need to return to the beginning and try another run up, relying on their musical memory. Poets who have learned their poems in this way often find it extremely difficult to perform in any other way.

3.4 Possible origins

Phrasing that disrupts syntax echoes the rhetorical trope of the speech giver, the preacher, and the politician. It can be compared to the rhetorical device used by Martin Luther King in his 'I have a dream' speech. Perhaps the poets discussed have a point. Perhaps the syntax *can* keep an audience hooked and listening. By connecting the beginning of a new phrase to the end of the previous one, then pausing before the subject of the new phrase, the audience might be kept engaged, anticipating what might follow. King's speech was phrased as follows⁴³:

I have a dream (*pause*) that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood I have a dream (*pause*) that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice I have a dream (*pause*) that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they

⁴³ King also paused in other places, however this is not a full transcript but just an indication of the particular pauses I wish to discuss and compare with British spoken word voice.

will not be judged by the colour of the skin but by the content of their character I
have a dream today (*pause*)

King's delivery is at odds with the syntax of the line, or the 'deep structure' of the language (as it would be termed in linguistics). Where in a written text we would have a full stop at the end of the sentence, which in spoken language would equate to a pause, (and a breath) King does not pause at all, but runs straight into the anaphoric phrase 'I have a dream' and *then* pauses. King's pauses always come before the sub clause, making it less syntactically obstructive than the placement of pauses in spoken word voice. Analyses of King's rhetoric trace his techniques back to preachers (Charteris-Black 61-63). Many African American poets have been inspired by the rhetoric of the preacher. In an interview 'Poets and Preachers: How Black Literature Blurs the Lines Between Sacred and Secular' Josef Sorett writes:

When I was regularly traveling from churches to poetry readings, I saw many of the same faces – in the audiences and congregations, as well as on stage and in pulpits. I heard many of the same questions raised, concerns voiced, and subjects broached in these two different spaces, sites that are often marked as distinctly sacred and secular. While I wouldn't go so far as to conflate preaching and poetry, the sanctuary and the literary salon, there is in fact a longstanding relationship between these two kinds of social spaces and cultural performances. (*Religion Dispatches*)

Listening again to Caleb Femi's poem 'Children of the 'Narm', we can hear a feature of his phrasing that I did not comment on above. Femi, like King, attaches his anaphoric phrase: 'We are the children of the 'Narm' to the end of the phrase before it, and then pauses:

"our Native songs escape on the Estuarine wind we are the children of the 'Narm"
(*pause*)

I noted that King's pause is less syntactically disruptive than the pauses heard in British spoken word voice. Femi's pause after 'We are the children of the 'Narm' is the same rhetorical device as that used by King, and is a feature that Femi uses in addition to phrasing that disrupts syntax. Both King's and Femi's method of attaching their anaphoric phrases to the end of the previous phrase before pausing have an impact on

meaning and our way of listening, holding tension and anticipation as we are made to wait for the phrase to be completed. The pauses that come after rather than before conjunctions in British spoken word voice rarely seem to have such rhetorical effect. Within British spoken word this feature has become recurrent and habitual, signalling ‘spoken word voice’ rather than serving rhetoric, imagery or language.

Although British spoken word voice is a uniform delivery mode that does not seem to serve specific images or distinctive lines within a poem, it can communicate through sheer drive and intensity, which suits some poems and poets. We can hear this in Tempest’s performances. ‘Hold Your Own’ and ‘Renegade’, like many of Kate Tempest’s poems and lyrics are grand and abstract, they rally her listeners to join her call to the human spirit in challenging times and places. Her sentiments are so generalised they can apply to many people in many different circumstances, which contributes to the sense of communal energy and the perception of her as ‘an essential narrator’ for our time (Vincent). A reviewer writing for *The National Student* talks about her ‘ability to enrapture whole crowds’ and writes:

At first glance, she may look like a missionary given a microphone outside WHSmiths. But don’t be deceived – Tempest manages to turn what could easily descend into blind prophecy into pure art. (Taft)

Her audience responds to the energy of her performances, and the energy that her performances inspire in them. As Liam Taft’s review suggests, there is a religiosity to her delivery and to the audience response; it evokes the same kind of communal fervour that preachers often inspire. The comments posted below the Youtube recording of ‘Hold Your Own’ sound like the ‘co-signing’ (affirming and agreeing) that is heard in a congregation in the black church described by Geneva Smitherman (107). The Youtube ‘congregation’ form a kind of ‘amen corner’ where they talk back to Tempest’s Youtube video with comments including: ‘preach the truth’; ‘amen’; ‘Damn! Preach!’; ‘preach the truth you blessed’; ‘such spirit’. This is like the ‘amen-saying’ of the traditional black church described by Smitherman in which ‘worship patterns are characterized by spontaneous preacher-congregation calls and responses, hollers and shouts’ (90). Smitherman explains:

The African-derived communication process of call-response may be briefly defined

as follows: spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listening in which all the speaker's statements ("calls") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener. In the traditional black church, call-response is often referred to as the congregation's way of "talking back" to the preacher, the most well-known example of which is "A-men". (104)

Although Tempest is not a preacher in a church, and often performs to majority white audiences (for instance at Glastonbury Festival), her delivery mode taps into the kind of passion and response more often found in non-secular (and often black) contexts. 'Hold Your Own' is a kind of sermon in which she tells us how to live, calling on her Glastonbury congregation to reject societal expectations: 'nothing you can buy will ever make you more whole' [2:56] and that 'you must feel each decision you make' [1:52]. The conviction of Tempest's delivery communicates (as Will Ellis writes in *The Mancunion*) 'pure passion', a passion that overrides detail of language, idea or image (as the spectrograms reveal, her intonation pattern, which helps communicate 'passion', is maintained throughout her poems). A Google search for: 'Kate Tempest, passion' reveals how many reviewers have described her work in this way. The word 'passion', with its Latin roots, *passio*, (suffering), conjures up the overflow of defiant struggle that she communicates. Ellis also makes the comparison to a preacher:

[Tempest] walks the tightrope between social commentary and all-out preaching, sometimes she does stumble slightly towards the latter. With most artists this would be cause to turn off, roll your eyes and wait to hear the next song play, but it is Tempest's passion that saves her.

Preachers also use intonation to rouse their congregation, particularly black African American and Caribbean preachers, whose mode of delivery can be traced back to oral literatures of West Africa (Smitherman 74).⁴⁴ This black preacher-like rhetoric can be traced in the various strands of performed poetry, including dub poetry, hip hop and slam, that have influenced the poets (such as Tempest) we hear today. Mervyn Morris says of the Caribbean dub poet Mikey Smith:

one can hardly fail to notice his firm sense of structure and of rhythmic patterning.

⁴⁴ Comparatively, MacArthur suggests that the 'monotonous incantation' of the American academic mode of poetry performance she analyses can be traced to the 'antiperformative' American Puritan church preacher and a 'passive' audience ('Monotony' 39).

The rhetoric of preachers and politicians, the cries of pedlars; allusions to proverbs, nursery rhymes, children's games, the Bible, Rasta talk, reggae, and to flashpoints in Jamaican and international news. ('Mikey Smith by Mervyn Morris')

Mikey Smith drew on many influences, voices and modes of delivery, among them the rhetorical style of the preacher. These delivery modes brought with them multiple associations, all of which contributed to Smith's tonal semantics. Henry Mitchell devotes a section of *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* to 'the Use of Tone'. Mitchell writes:

The most common or stereotypical [feature] is the use of a musical tone or chant in preaching. Among initiates it is variously referred to as "moaning," "whooping," "tuning," "zooning," or any one of several other more localized terms, each with a slightly different shade of meaning. (88-89)

These musical delivery modes are so distinctive that the 'initiates' have given them various names. Van Leeuwen uses the term 'provenance' – most simply defined as where a sound comes from, to refer to what happens when the associations we have with one sound is imported into a new context, and brings with it the associations of the original context (*Speech, Music, Sound* 46). It can also be seen as a form of 'Signifyin', a black cultural practice in which the performer comments on, or 'Signifies on' a distinctive mode of speech or song.⁴⁵ The sound of a particular mode of speech communicates in itself. Mitchell observes that 'it automatically makes some folks "happy" just to hear the tonal aspect of their religious mother tongue sounded in the pulpit' (89). Mitchell explains that some have a 'conditioned' response to the sound of intoned preaching:

for many older Blacks their first religious experience came with intoned preaching; thereafter, the response became more and more conditioned, so that any preacher using such a technique could automatically get a greater response simply by this association. (90)

These sermons transmit passion and belief; the content is generally already known and is not being heard for the first time, the point of the sermon is bringing the congregation

⁴⁵ I discuss 'Signifyin' in more depth in the following chapter.

together in prayer and religious passion. Mitchell writes that one of the ways ‘the history of much of Black Africa was preserved’ is through oral performance, that this has become ‘an affirmation of Black identity’, he writes that ‘intonation has a general significance as an identity signal’ and that now it has also ‘come to be used widely by Black preachers to indicate celebration’ (90). Mitchell is describing what Geneva Smitherman refers to as ‘tonal semantics’, when the sound of speech communicates as well as the content:

Not only are Black English speakers and listeners affected by linguistic meaning and linguistic sound, but there is an expectation that Black speech utterances will depend on and employ tonal contouring. (136)

Smitherman writes that a particular sound can ‘trip a familiar social chord’ (Ibid.), and she includes ‘intonational contouring’ in her list of representations of tonal semantics, giving the kind of ‘talk-singing’ of the traditional black preacher as an example (138). Spoken word voice also employs tonal semantics; by using one kind of intonation pattern, the associations and meanings are limited to those triggered by one mode. The sustained high tone followed by the falling pitch at the end of phrases communicates in itself, triggering ‘a familiar social chord’ not only because so many spoken word poets use the same kind of melody, but also because this use of high-stylised ‘passionate’ delivery has resonances with the rhetoric of passion that is particularly heard in black secular and non-secular contexts.

In 1966, the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget gave a paper on African traditional non-prose forms at a Conference on African Languages and Literatures held at Northwestern University. Rouget discusses ‘Dogon texts’ written in *Sigi So*, the ritual language of the Dogon people (from Mali in West Africa). Rouget has recorded examples himself, and also refers to the research of Michel Leiris, who identifies that phrases are delivered in one ‘respiratory group’, with the delivery sped up and adjusted depending on the breath. Leiris describes how ‘each sentence forms a kind of verse’ (Rouget 47). Rouget (and Michel Leiris), report the poets composing in *Sigi So* add a sound (the syllable ‘boy’) onto the end of every phrase, not for its meaning, but for its sound. The addition of this syllable functions as a kind of ‘oral punctuation’ and is ‘uttered on a lower and duller tone than the rest of the verse’ (Leiris in Rouget 47). Rouget explains:

first, the particle boy, which, as written by M. Leiris, actually functions as a rhyme, but for much longer unities than the ones traditionally named “line,” and secondly, the way of reciting with a particularly swift delivery which brings into play what he calls a “respiratory group.” Having personally recorded some fragments of Sigi So (in the present case, the dialogue of a Sigi man with a dove), I will add that these texts are delivered with a kind of intonation difficult to describe, but definitely different from normal speech. (47)

This use of a particular sound and tone at the end of each phrase creates a kind of chain rhyme similar to that often used by spoken word poets. It means that, as in British spoken word voice, each phrase ends with the same pitch and intonation pattern. Rouget reports that something similar is found in the oral poetry of the West African Fulani, who use ‘chain-rhymes’ which are based on ‘a “reiterative sound figure,” this figure being the word which ends the first utterance and is picked up again’ and is repeated, becoming the first word of the next phrase (46). It may be a stretch, but this practice of adding on a word for its sonic properties to the end of a phrase sounds not only similar to the use of falling intonation, but also phrasing that disrupts syntax. In *Oral Literature in Africa* Ruth Finnegan describes the stylised intonation heard in praise poems (particularly in Southern Sotho and Zulu praise poetry). Chiming with the examples from Fulani and Sigi poetry, Finnegan describes a stylised kind of pitch heard at the end of phrases amounting ‘to a kind of concluding formula, melodically marked, for each stanza’ (loc 3276). She adds, ‘there seems to be general agreement that praise poems are delivered much faster, and in a higher tone, than ordinary prose utterances’ (loc 3446).

Features such as distinctive intonation and phrasing patterns have always played a role in poetry performance. A repeating intonation pattern, such as that heard in British spoken word poetry, if delivered with the right kind of energy, can incite a kind of devotion in the crowd similar to that prompted by praise poems, public speakers and preachers. The next section looks at British spoken word voice from the perspective of linguistics, revealing the ways in which the listener might interpret specific intonation patterns.

3.5 Potential meanings

In the textbook *English Intonation*, the linguist J.C. Wells writes that the fall tone is

used in order to ‘proclaim’ something. He references David Brazil who named the fall the ‘proclaiming’ tone and the fall-rise the ‘referring term’ (Wells 87). Wells explains that the definite fall is the default tone for a statement:

in general we can say that by using a fall we indicate that what we say is potentially **complete** and that we express it with **confidence**, **definitely** and **unreservedly**. The fall thus also tends to signal **finality**. (25 – bold in original)

It follows that the falling tones of British spoken word voice sound like a series of definitive statements. We perceive each phrase as a closed statement, which highlights the notion of the poet-performer as speechmaker delivering a series of ideas, opinions and proclamations. This mode contrasts with the conversational mode used by poets in interviews and when introducing their poetry. In conversational speech we tend to end each phrase with a ‘continuity intonation’ suggesting there is more to come and inviting response (Van Leeuwen 99).⁴⁶ By contrast, Van Leeuwen notes that ‘finality intonations’ are found in speech ‘which cannot (or may not) be interrupted’ such as in the speech of newsreaders, which becomes ‘conclusiveness’ for its own sake, a deliberate foregrounding of the fact that the speaker always has the final word’ (100).

Although slight falling tones are heard in daily speech, signalling the end of a thought or phrase and also used at the end of ‘Wh’ questions (Wells 42), Van Leeuwen’s examples are of a more stylised kind of falling tone heard in ‘Newsreader voice’, a mode that is as distinctive as spoken word voice. Applying this to the poet who uses a similar definitive intonation pattern we might posit that the poet’s use of the tone foregrounds ‘conclusiveness’ and their own authority. By using this definitive intonation pattern the poet presents as fixed, definite and authoritative – a stable identity.

The interpretation of spoken word delivery as a series of proclamations stands assuming the audience is sensitive to the meanings normally suggested by a falling intonation pattern. However, audience members who watch a number of poets delivering their poems in this way may not find meaning in the intonation. Just as upspeak has become

⁴⁶ We can hear this in Hollie McNish’s introductions to her poems in ‘Hollie McNish – Recorded live at Abbey Road Studios’ on Youtube. The format is a poetry set and not a dialogue or post-show chat, but her intonation makes the audience comfortable with her discourse and free to comment and join in (which they do not do during her poems).

a new prosodic trend rather than suggesting uncertainty and questioning, spoken word voice may simply communicate that the poet is performing in a spoken word voice. Van Leeuwen points out that we encounter stylised modes of delivery in many situations, such as a street seller's repetitive melody, and newsreaders:

newsreaders are not supposed to add their own interpretation. They must be neutral. Their speech should be as devoid of any expression by means of intonation and rhythm as the written language itself. Hence they subject their speech to formal, more or less 'mechanical' rules, including the rule of 'rhythmic regularization'. (45)

A mode of speech that uses repetitive rhythmic patterns and a constant tempo has come to signal 'newsreader'. This 'mechanical' delivery mode means that the reader sounds impartial, neutral and unemotional. In the context of a news programme we do not notice the strange extra-daily speech mode because it is a convention. In this context, a casual more natural mode of speech *would* be noticeable. Wells asks 'What makes mothers sound like mothers, lovers sound like lovers, lawyers sound like lawyers [...] Partly, their characteristic intonation' (12). The newsreader's characteristic intonation might be compared to the characteristic intonation of the spoken word poet, just as the newsreader's intonation carries the meaning of 'newsreader' – along with all the associations we have with newsreaders – impersonal, confident, detached, authoritative; the spoken word voice signals 'spoken word poet' of a particular place and generation.

Salena Godden comments 'there's a real trend of people putting on a voice to make it sound like poetry' (*Talking Liberties*). British spoken word voice is a kind of voice and prosody that is *put on*. When used occasionally, a distinctive mode of delivery stands out, and is foregrounded. For instance, Godden's 'Darth Vader' voice, although it is a regular feature of several of her poems in performance, is used on specific lines and words, and therefore the strangeness of it is foregrounded, resulting in the sound itself carrying potential meaning. Although spoken word voice is a stylised delivery mode that is 'put on', it is standardised and not foregrounded, therefore does not carry particular signification. When a phrase is always delivered with the same intonation the poet cannot use intonation to express a different kind of thought. When the intonation is the same for every line, every line sounds the same, regardless of content. For those poets and audience members who are very familiar with spoken word, spoken word voice is automatic and as unconscious as the intonation we use in our daily speech. It

has simply become the way that poetry is performed. Just as a newsreader's intonation tells us they are reading the news, when a poet's intonation is comparable to a number of others it signposts that the poet is working in a particular tradition and aligns their work with their contemporaries.

Poets from across the UK use 'spoken word voice' regardless of regional accent. I have heard Scottish poets performing in Scottish accents but still employing falling intonation and phrasing that disrupts syntax (for instance at UniSlam in Leicester, 2017). In his article for the *Morning Star*, 'Poetry Voice Needs an Accent on Class', Tim Wells points out that spoken word voice can transcend accent. Wells writes: 'Accent is a place and accent is a weapon. It's one used against us'. Wells points out that writing 'in our own voices validates our lives and experiences'. Because well-known poets who use spoken word voice also have London accents (such as Tempest), when other poets who do not have London accents use spoken word voice, they often also lose their own accents and sometimes pick up a London accent along with the other features of spoken word voice. This was apparent in a project I worked on (as a director) with a group of poets in Birmingham entitled '10 Letters'. Several of the poets were performing their poems in spoken word voice (I have already mentioned Aliyah Denton from the same project). The young poet Callum Bate's use of spoken word voice was preventing him from speaking in his (Birmingham) accent. The Birmingham accent has a lot of rising tones in it. As soon as he rediscovered his own voice and accent, he also lost the falling tones and syntax of British spoken word voice.

3.6 Is spoken word a separate genre?

In his 1966 paper on the subject of African traditional non-prose forms, Gilbert Rouget writes that his subject 'raises the whole problem of poetics' (45). Although Rouget's subject is oral poetry, he struggles to define this work as poetry, tentatively calling it 'non-prose' instead. Rouget's 'problem' is the definition of 'the poetry function' that was offered by Jakobson in his influential paper 'Linguistics and Poetics', only six years earlier. Jakobson wrote (in his own italics): '*The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination*' (38). When discussing the possibilities of selection that are open to the poet, the stylistic features Jakobson focuses on are metre, syllables and word stress. He does not consider performance relevant, agreeing with Wimsatt and Beardsley that the performance is just

an event and the poem must be an ‘enduring object’ (Jakobson 44). Jakobson’s definition made Rouget’s research rather difficult:

If again we discard all compositions that are written or “tainted” by writing, no African text, as far as we know, has been collected, that might strictly speaking be called poetry, i.e., ruled by one of the versmaking systems (syllabic, accentual, quantitative, tonematic) mentioned by R. Jakobson. (Rouget 46)

Rouget writes that according to ‘classical versmaking’ the ‘poetry’ that he discusses in the paper cannot be considered poetry (54). Rouget points out that it *would* be considered poetry if Jakobson’s definition were to be expanded to include features of performance such as phrasing and sound repetition. Rouget does not consider the solution to exclude African oral poetry from ‘poetry’ (as to do so would tantamount to saying that there is no oral ‘poetry’ in Africa). Rather than question the premise and existence of a definition at all, Rouget proposes that the solution is to expand the definition of poetry to include two additional ‘prosodic features’ (47). Although most poetry criticism today is not preoccupied with this ‘whole problem of poetics’ (with the exception of studies such as Bradford’s *Poetry, the Ultimate Guide*), the discussion of what is and isn’t poetry continues. Bernardine Evaristo’s suggestion that spoken word is a ‘separate genre’ to poetry (discussed in chapter one) takes us back to questioning what ‘poetry’ is and how spoken word might not fit this definition. It *could* be argued that these conventions of British spoken word voice are what make ‘spoken word’ a recognisably different genre to ‘poetry’.

If spoken word is a separate genre from poetry then we must decide which poets are just great performers and which are spoken word artists/poets. If the difference is the use of spoken word voice, then we must decide when the falling tones are of a large enough interval to be considered ‘spoken word’, and when they are more like conventional falling tones used at the ends of phrases. We must decide how many times a performer must pause after rather than before conjunctions and pronouns in order to be in the ‘spoken word’ rather than the ‘poetry’ category. We will need to find a way of differentiating between those who consistently use spoken word voice throughout their poems, and those who use it strategically at certain moments. Poets may need to split their work down the middle and be ‘poets’ when on the page, but as soon as they open their mouths become ‘spoken word artists’, a different category.

Perhaps we might solve the whole problem by proposing that those who call themselves ‘spoken word artists’ are spoken word artists and those who call themselves poets are poets. But then how will we stop others misclassifying a ‘poet’ as a ‘spoken word artist’? As noted above, Apples and Snakes, which has used the term ‘performance poetry’ since the 80s has recently launched an archive of all their works and all the poets they have worked with (from sound poets such as Bob Cobbing, dub poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, and almost all the poets interviewed for this project) under the descriptor ‘spoken word archive’, without asking anyone if they are comfortable being re-categorised in this way. Is it possible to dispassionately define a group of poets as being in the ‘spoken word’ rather than ‘poetry’ camp when (as identified in the first chapter), the term is so often used derogatively? What does it mean that one of the best known figures within ‘spoken word’, Kate Tempest, does not use the descriptor on her own website but sticks to the more established titles of musician, poet, novelist and playwright?

Although the proliferation and distinctiveness of British spoken word voice makes it *possible* to suggest that ‘spoken word’ is separate from poetry, in fact there are many influential poets working in this field who do not perform in this mode. If spoken word artists only worked within music and did not publish on the page or perform at poetry events it might be possible to describe spoken word as a separate genre, but there are very few examples of ‘spoken word’ poets for whom this is the case. Perhaps this is the distinction between spoken word ‘artists’ and ‘poets’, however, again the words are used so interchangeably that it is impossible to draw these lines. As Niall O’Sullivan points out, ‘writing is not the same as talking’, and every poet performs in some kind of ‘Poet Voice’, whether it is one that is shared by a particular group of poets, or one that is more unique to them (‘Why Every Poet’). Influences and modes of performing are changing quickly. It is possible that the spoken word voice I explore in this chapter is already being replaced by a more conversational and restrained mode.⁴⁷ Some even come close to the ‘monotonous incantation’ of the American academic mode described

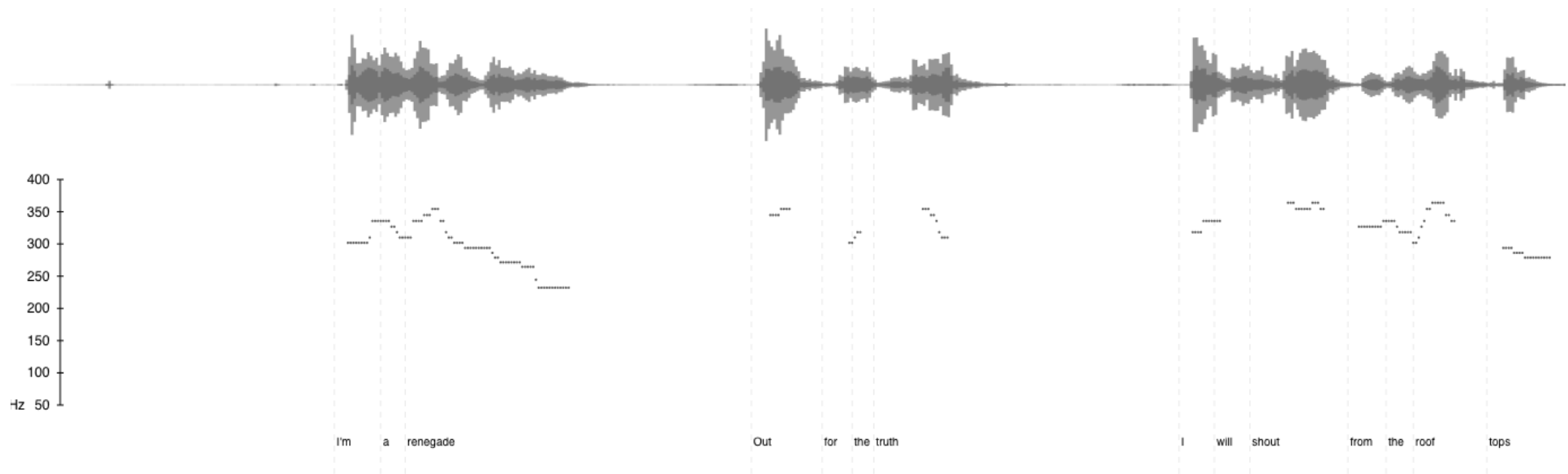
⁴⁷ O’Sullivan identifies that as well as the ‘literary Poet Voice’ (like the one described by MacArthur) and the ‘Spoken Word Poet Voice’, at a recent reading he noticed ‘younger literary poets’ who delivered their work ‘in a similar fashion’. He describes that their poems were ‘declaimed with a sense of restrained urgency – as if they were trying to catch someone’s attention while trying not to cause too much of a scene’ (‘Why Every Poet’). This could be the same mode I refer to above and what the poet Tim Wells briefly describes (in an article for *Morning Star* on Poet Voice) as ‘quiet, measured Warsan Shire copyists’.

by MacArthur – for instance the poet Zia Ahmed (another Roundhouse poetry slam winner) mumbles his poems (very successfully) in an understated, conversational manner.

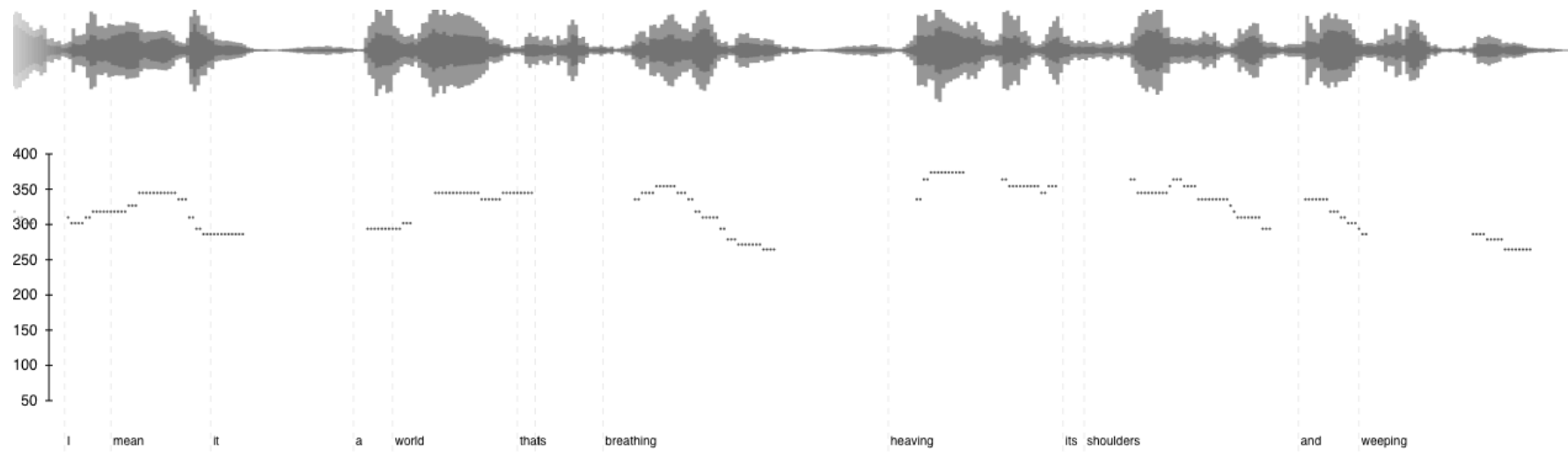
The features of British spoken word voice can be used intentionally, to rally a crowd and evoke the rhetorical drive of preachers and public speakers. When the delivery ‘flow’ is the same throughout the poem it can create a swell of energy, communicating an emotion or impulse behind the words, driving through the poem. When spoken word voice is a choice of stylisation made by the poet, it is part of their live writing. However, when it becomes automatised and is not used intentionally, it stops being connected to the meaning potential of the poem or the performance. When each line is delivered in the same way it is as if it has been pre-programmed. The poet who is ‘hypnotised’ (as Sissay puts it) by their own voice cannot respond to the audience and the live moment. When the intonation is fixed and is so automatic that the poet cannot recognise it, they are replaying rather than live writing. All types of Poet Voice, when used automatically for every line and every poem, reduce the ways a poet can write live. Intonation, pitch and phrasing, the three main features of spoken word voice, are features that a poet can ‘write live’ with. This investigation of spoken word voice provides a contrast to the use of prosody in the performances of Godden, David J and Sissay. The following chapters reveal how Godden, David J and Sissay use their numerous delivery modes and vocal qualities to ‘write live’.

Spectrograms: Appendix to British Spoken Word Voice

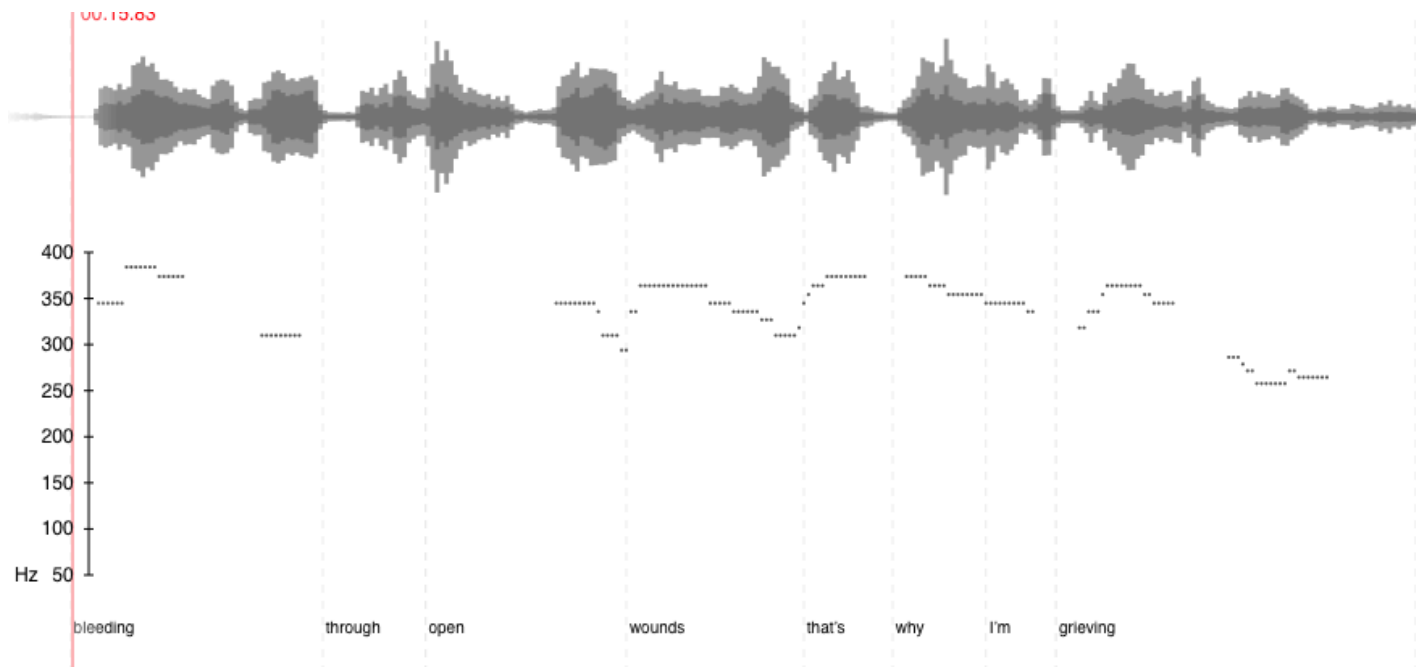
Spectrogram 1 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



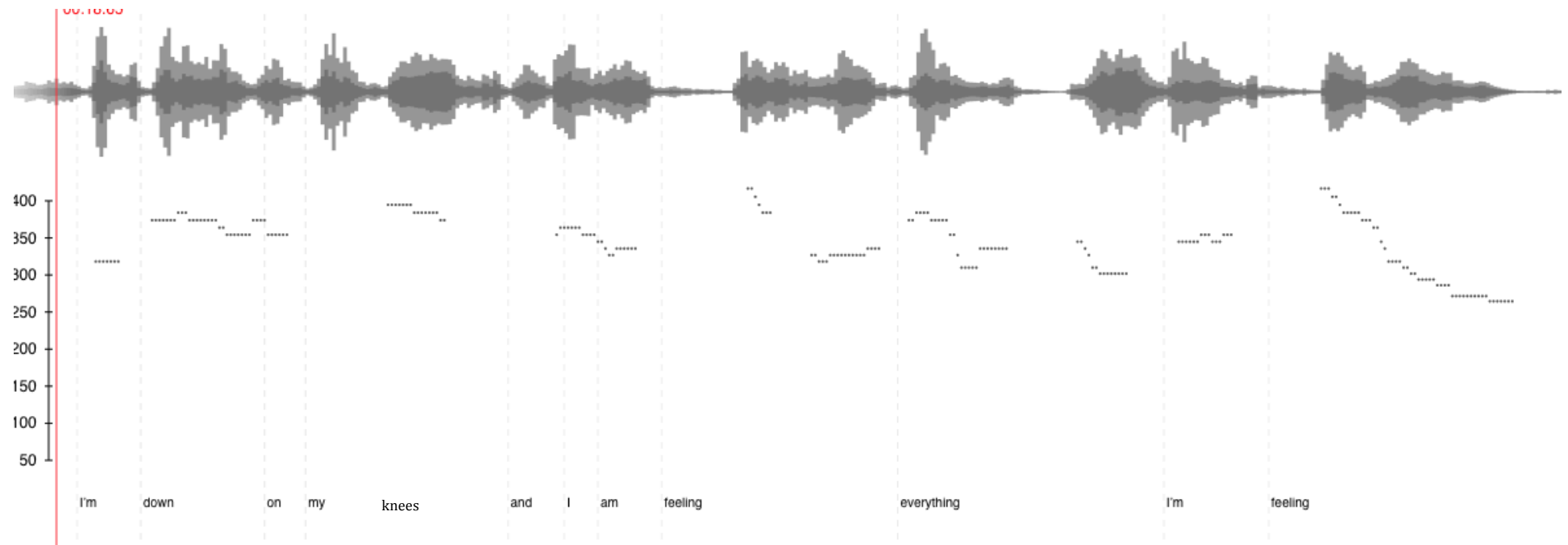
Spectrogram 2 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



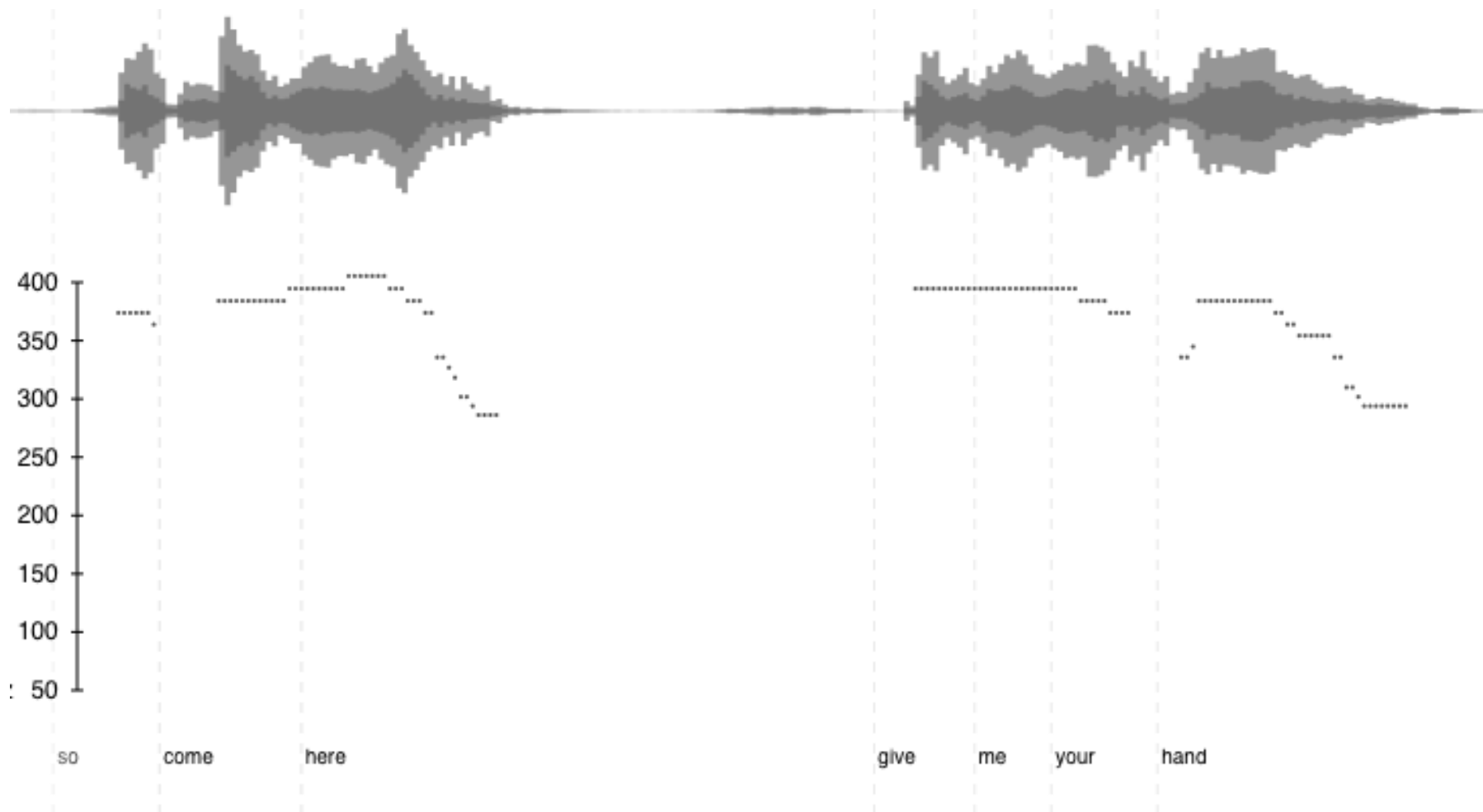
Spectrogram 3 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



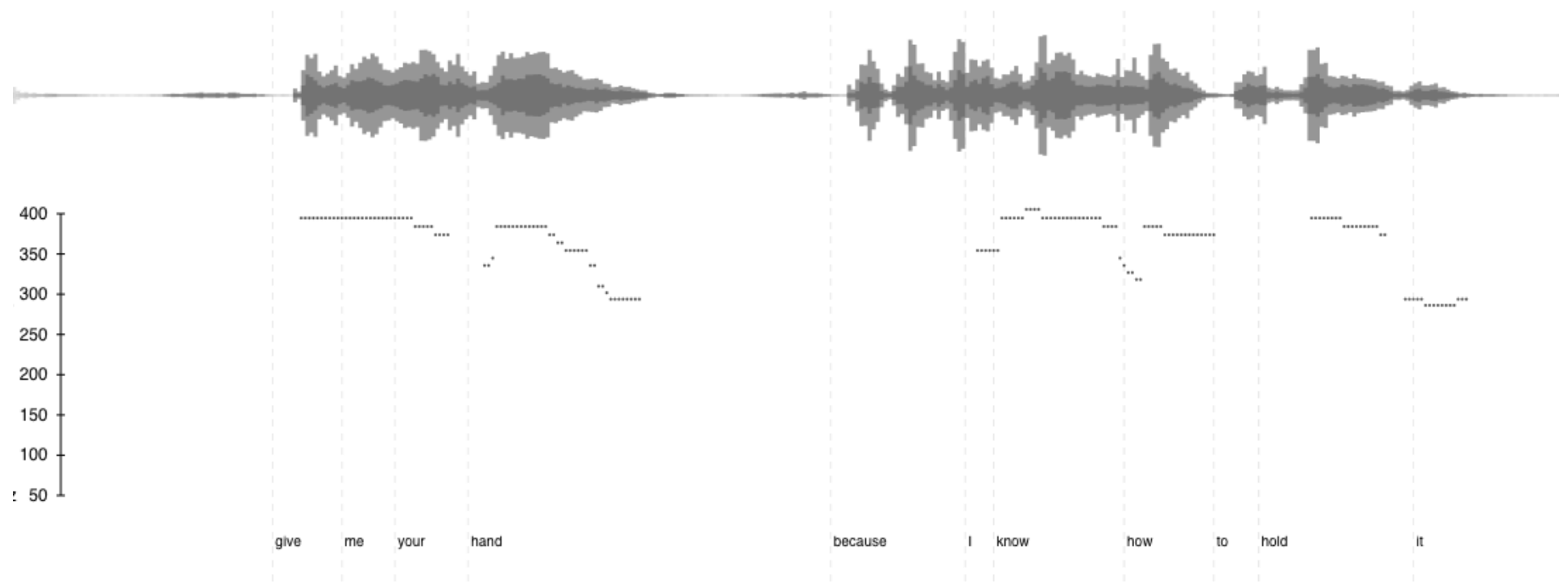
Spectrogram 4 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



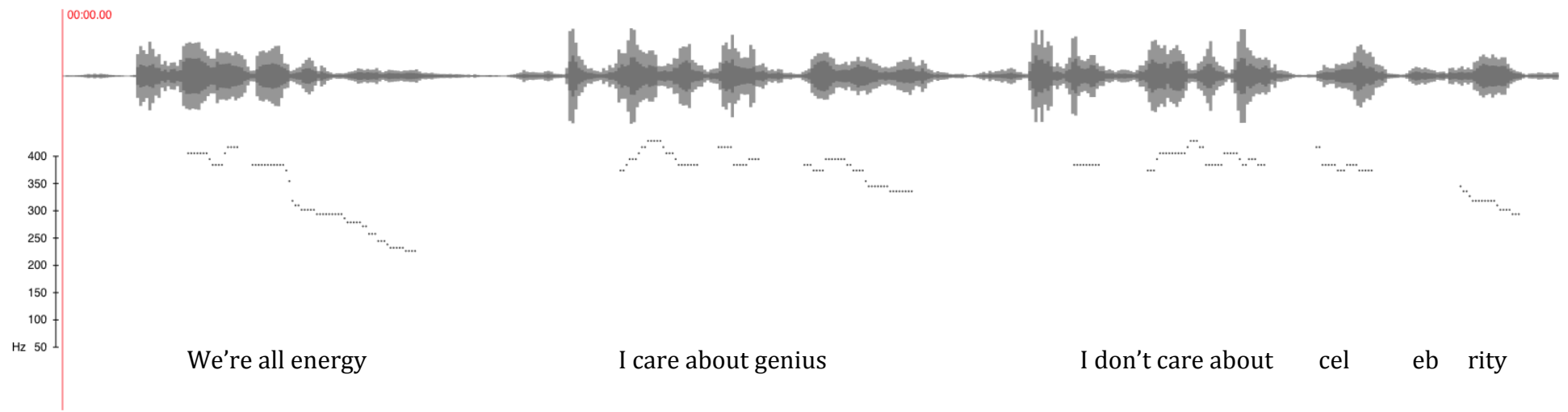
Spectrogram 5 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



Spectrogram 6 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



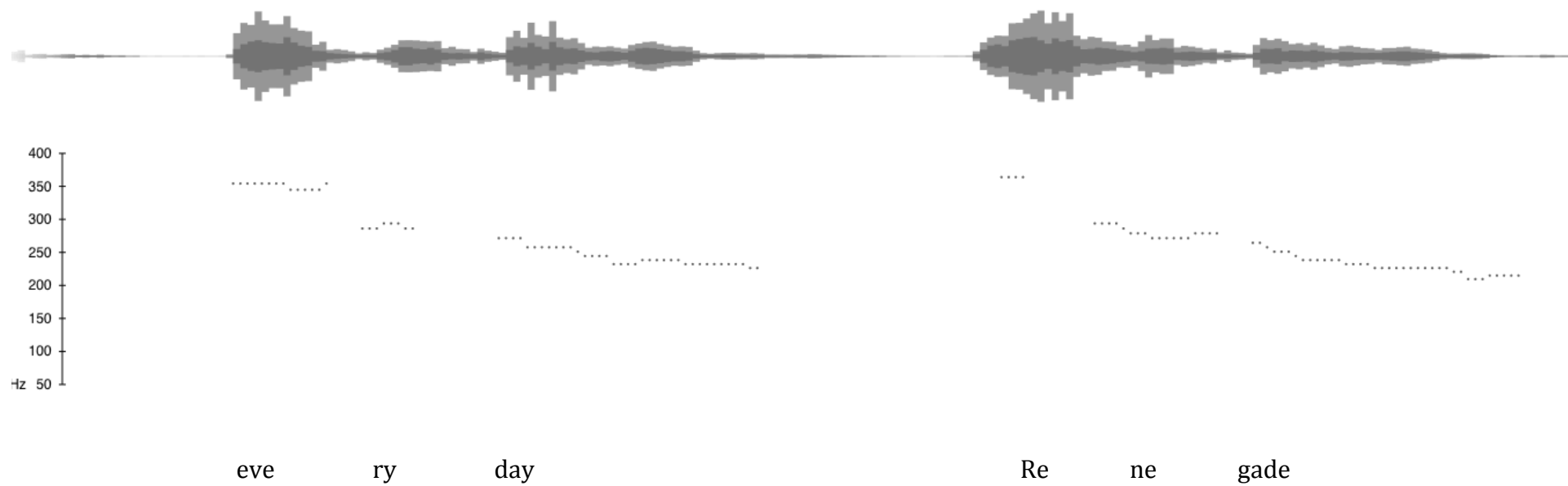
Spectrogram 7 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



Spectrogram 8 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



Spectrogram 9 Kate Tempest 'Renegade'



Spectrogram 10 'Kate Tempest Interview'



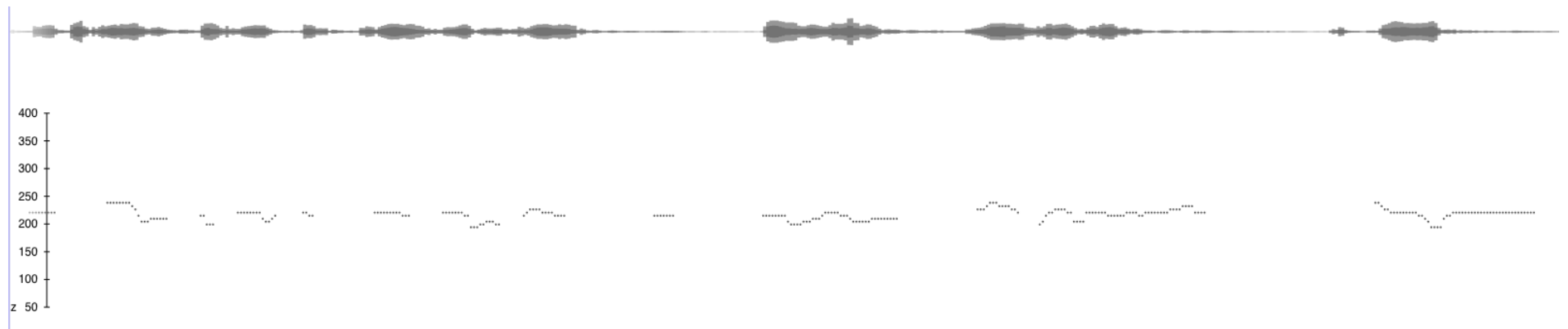
One part of me thinks

I've always

known it and wanted to do it and felt like it was happening whether or not I wanted to

write poetry I was already involved in writing poetry

Spectrogram 11 'Kate Tempest Interview'



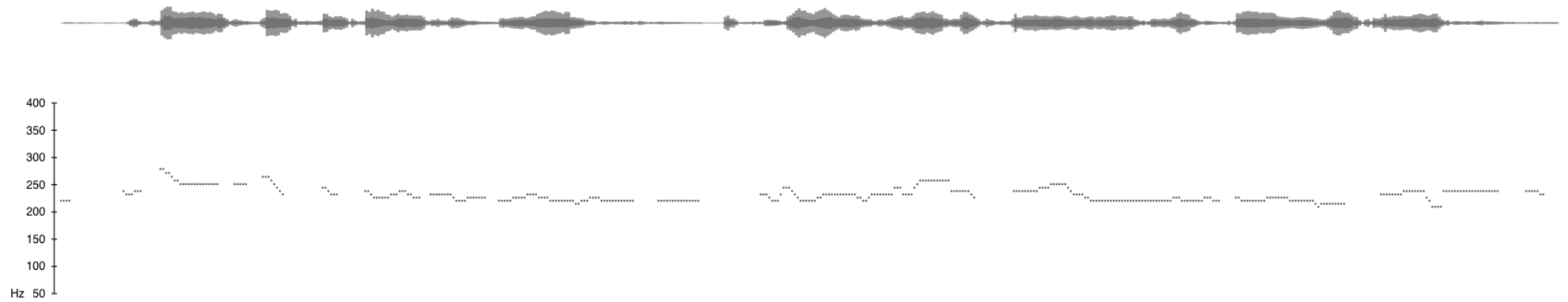
but another part of me thinks I'm not even I'm not

there yet

I'm not even

a poet

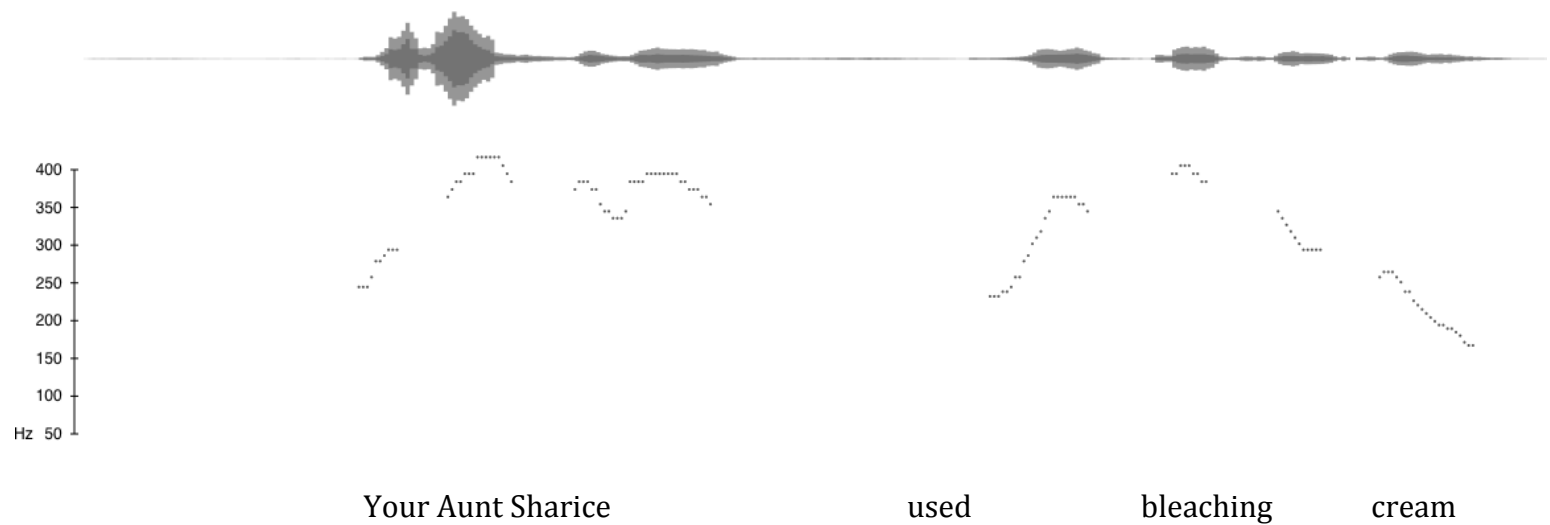
Spectrogram 12 'Kate Tempest Interview'



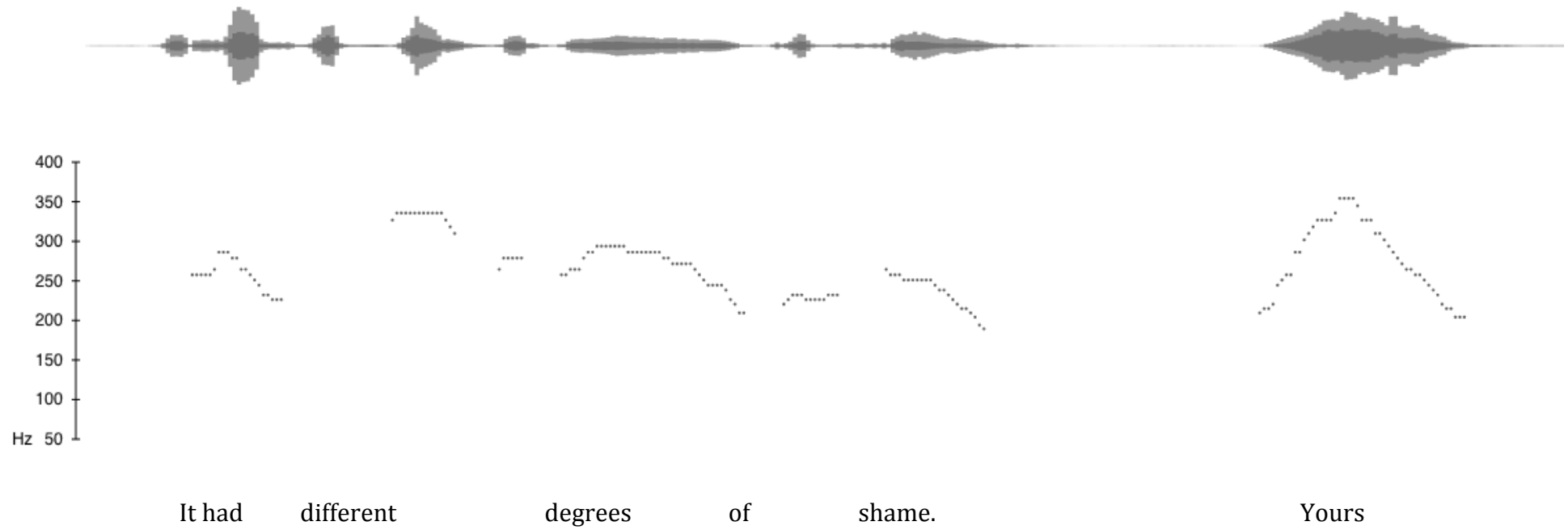
I came into poetry in quite an interesting way

which is that I was a musician and I was a rapper and I wrote lyrics

Spectrogram 13 Indigo Williams ('Confounding Stereotypes')



Spectrogram 14 Indigo Williams ('Confounding Stereotypes')



Spectrogram 15 Indigo Williams ('Confounding Stereotypes')



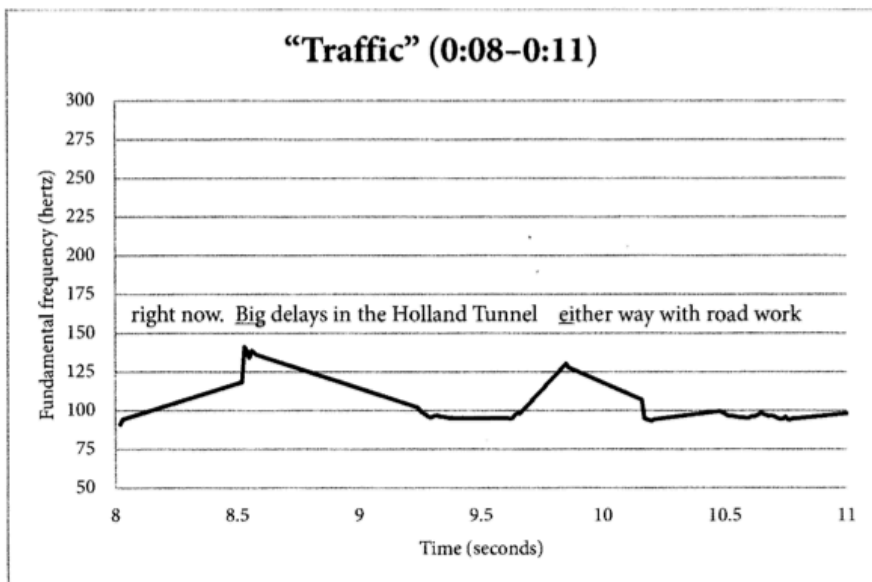
My name is Indigo Williams

I am a poet and spoken word educator.

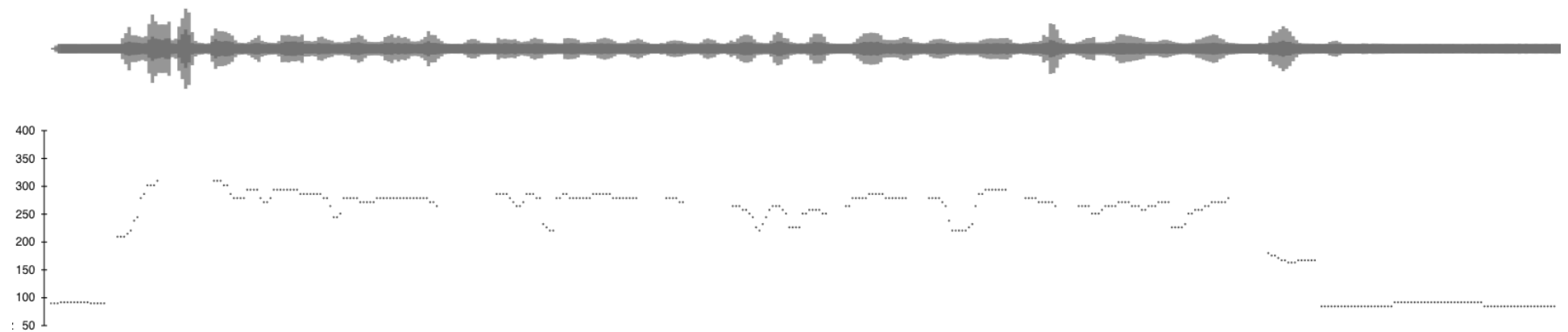
and I'm going to be sharing two poems with you all today

Spectrogram 16 Kenneth Goldsmith 'Traffic' (MacArthur 'Monotonous' Fig. 10)

FIG. 10

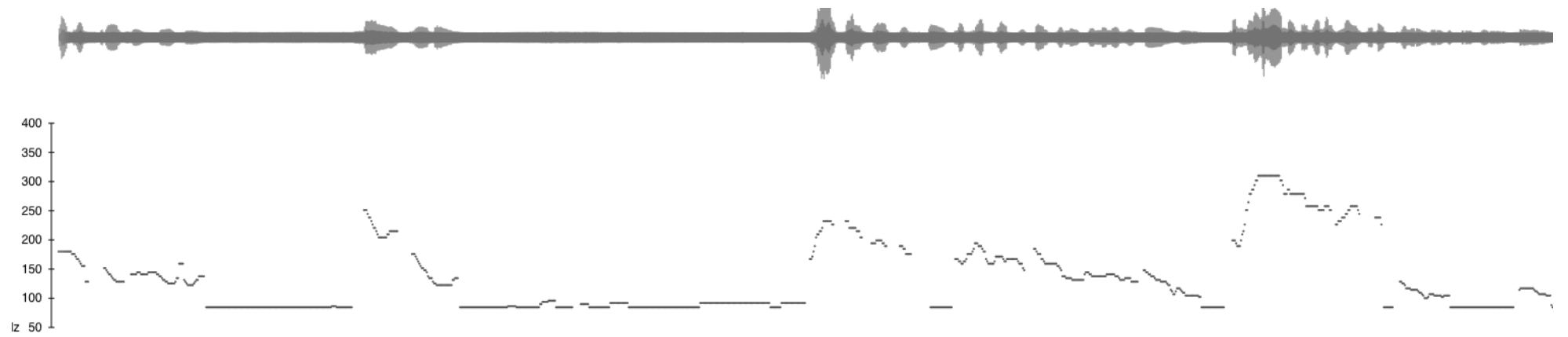


Spectrogram 17 David J 'This is What We Do'



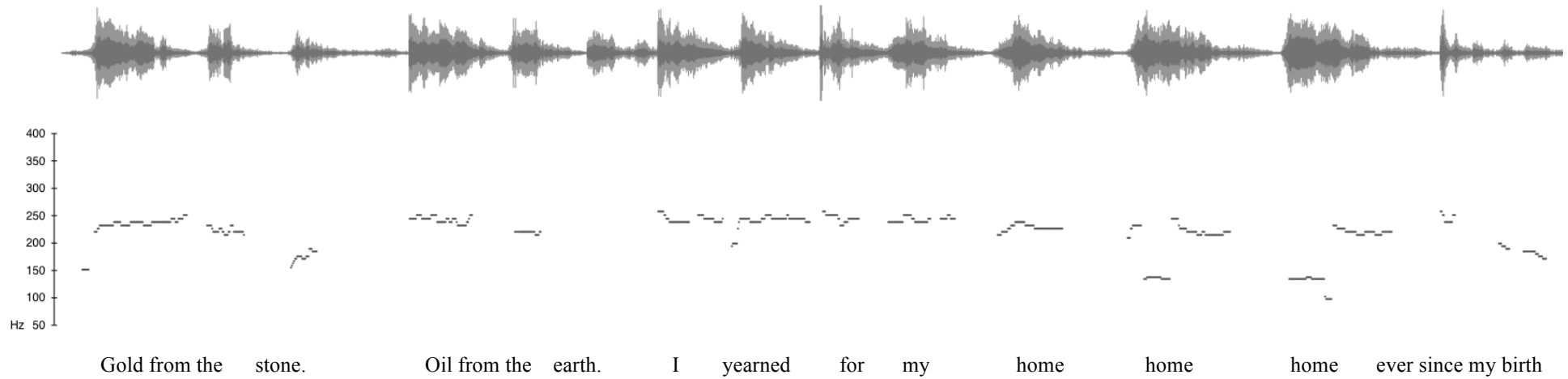
A lot of people don't even know what to do with the lyrical because their performance is weak like a man with one test icle

Spectrogram 18 David J 'This is What We Do'

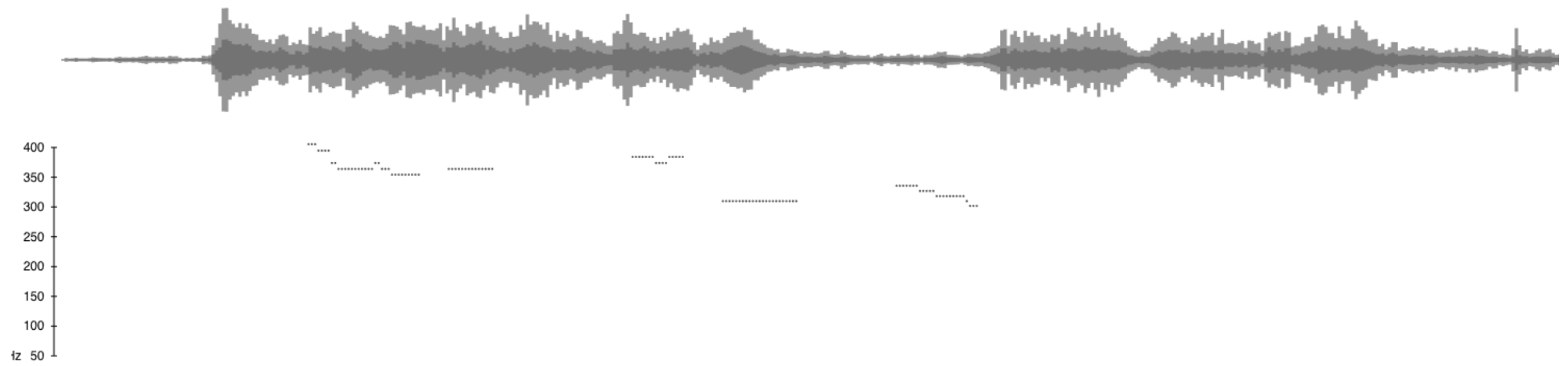


... Jacobs crackers, butter, cheese – edam. Waiting for it to speak because objects are sent to me from another time zone because we are living in a multi di- come on David continue, I will.

Spectrogram 19 ‘Gold from the Stone’ (‘Lemn Sissay performs’)



Spectrogram 20 Salena Godden ('Soapbox loves')



Three day old vomit on the pavement!

Imagine if you had to lick it.

Chapter four

Salena Godden: Talk-singing, the Poet as Musician

This chapter explores three aspects of Salena Godden's live writing: improvisation, use of the body and voice, and 'talk-singing'. It explores how Godden adapts her poems to fit a musical structure live, using the page as a score and words as material to riff with, and how her use of talk-singing (one of the features of tonal semantics discussed by Geneva Smitherman) adds meaning potential to her performances. This chapter considers the question of how the lens through which we view a performance changes it. As Godden says in our interview, she is on 'loads of edges': does viewing her work through the lens of live writing, as a poet who makes a choice to sing, rather than viewing her work through the lens of music and seeing her as a singer (who is also a poet), change the way we listen to and analyse her performance? Are labels, in spite of Godden's dislike for them, actually important, impacting on the ways we hear and analyse poetry performances?

4.1 Introducing Salena Godden

When she was twenty, Salena Godden's fantasy stage name was: "Salena Saliva Gloopy Godiva God Bless Goddam Godden", because she wanted a name that would take up all the letters on the billboard (interview). Although she now goes by Salena Godden, "Salena Saliva" stuck for a long time. As well as conjuring up the grainy physicality of her vocal performances, this visceral evocation of bodily fluid chimes with the content of many of her poems: 'Imagine if you had to lick it!' invites us to engage in imaginative licking; 'The Good Cock' revels in its detail: 'He had the foreskin pinched between his fingers and when he let go of the end, creamy sperm shot all over the front car tyre'; 'Cervical Smear', is equally visceral: 'try to use lube and not mayonnaise'; and 'Eyes like Woodlice' zooms in on a woman's gunky mascara and 'pitta-bread tits' (*Fishing* 165, 30, 47). Her work often feels like a poetic version of Lucian Freud's nudes, exposing the crevasses, sweat and saliva of the human body.

Godden is a political poet, as well as playing with the politics of the female body and sexuality she writes rants and satire on topics including feminism: 'My Tits are More Feminist Than Your Tits'; war: 'A Strong and Stiffly Worded Letter'; Theresa May: 'I

Will Not Vote For Mrs May’; pessimism: ‘Pessimism is for Lightweights’; and terrorism: ‘November, Paris Blue’, which was written just after the Paris attacks in 2015. Godden’s creative self-naming reflects her approach to labels more widely. As noted in chapter one, Godden thinks that ‘lists and prizes, boxes and labels are killing us’ (interview). Although she always describes herself as a poet, her poetry plays with the borders of comedy, music, song and speech. In an interview for *The Author*, Godden elaborates on her frustration with labels:

Poetry is often confused by its many guises and names, too: performance poetry, spoken word, punk poetry, rant poetry, slam poetry and even rap. I get frustrated by the names and labels used to identify me and my work – I don’t really fit in any of these boxes: ‘black poet’ or ‘feminist poet’ or even ‘performance poet’. These are lazy marketing tools... So what do I call myself? I’m Jamish – that’s my name for a mix of Jamaican and Irish and British. (64)

The poet and musician Jock Scot introduced Godden to nineties ranting poetry. She describes meeting him for an interview for ‘AJ News’, an acid jazz magazine she set up in her twenties when working for Acid Jazz records, and he pointed out that Godden’s ‘unfinished songs’ were in fact poems (interview). Godden started performing her poems at venues such as ‘The Colony Room’, a private members’ club: ‘sometimes when there wasn’t an event there I’d get up on the bar and do poems for whiskey’ and at other bars and pubs alongside musicians and bands, including ‘this amazing groovy Irish bar called Filthy McNasties’ where she’d ‘get up and do a little improvisation with The Libertines. I’d make up some rude words’. The ranting poets like Tim Wells and John Cooper Clarke appealed as they had similarities with her idol, Charles Bukowski (another name she was given in the early days was ‘BirdKowski’). In a blog for the Poetry School, written as one of the shortlisted poets for the 2017 Ted Hughes Award, Godden comments on the influence of the ranting poets on her work and describes her own poem ‘Can’t Be Bovvered’ as an ‘undiluted tirade of frustration and idealism’ (‘How I did it’).

Since her first performances alongside the ranting poets in the nineties, Godden has not stopped. She still does her own ‘hustling and bustling’ and all the admin and producing that goes into organising gigs and getting commissions. She jokes, ‘amateurs go on tour, part-time people go on tour, I live on tour, I’m constantly doing gigs’ (interview). In

2014 she published two books, a memoir, *Springfield Road*, through Unbound (a publisher with a crowd-funding platform, enabling it to publish books that the public funds) and her first collection of poetry *Fishing in the Aftermath, Poems 1994-2014* (Burning Eye Books), collecting twenty years of poems.⁴⁸ Although she has published her work on the page before releasing this collection (her pamphlet *Under the Pier* was published in 2011 by Nasty Little Press), Godden's twenty-year career prior to releasing this collection demonstrates that for many poets the page-based collection is not the primary mode of making poetry public. Rather than releasing a first collection in the form of the traditional slim volume, Godden and Bernie took a more archival approach. In the introduction to *Fishing in the Aftermath* she explains: 'Please note I have edited as little as possible of the early poems to keep the CAPS LOCK style and spirit of that punk-ass poet true to the page' (16). *Fishing in the Aftermath* is more a record and celebration of a life as poet than a volume edited within a 'house style'. The book contains some of her most performed poems, short stories, and early poems in CAPS LOCK punk style. At the launch of the book in the East London members' club, Vout O Reenees, other poets did 'cover' versions, emulating Godden's performance style, revealing that the distinctive way she performs is integral to her poetry; the poets reading her work reproduced not just her words but all elements of her 'live writing'.

Salena Godden has spent many years performing and improvising with musicians, working on the edges of poet and singer. She sang and recited poetry as front woman of the ska-punk-breakbeat band 'SaltPeter', releasing numerous records between 1999-2007. She featured as 'Salena Saliva' on Coldcut's fourth record *Let us Play* a few years earlier (a pop sampling electronic music duo). In 2017 Godden's album of live shows, *LIVEwire* was released by an independent spoken word record label 'Nymphs and Thugs' and was shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award for new work in poetry. She told me 'improvising and making things up with a rhythm was something that always came quite easily to me'. She honed these skills at a regular night she set up in 2009, 'The Book Club Boutique':

there was a theme every week, could be Alice in Wonderland, Ye Olde London, Bukowski, whatever, and each week I would dress up for the theme and then make up and improvise a song for that theme, so it kept me on my toes making new work

⁴⁸ Burning Eye Books was established by Clive Bernie in 2012, and (as the Burning Eye website confirms) specialises in publishing books by 'performance poets'.

every week. (interview)

This background in music, singing and improvisation can be heard in her performance of ‘Limp Expectations’, particularly a version of the poem that was performed live in 2014 with a band, as part of ‘Tongue Fu’, a regular event programmed by the poet Chris Redmond and usually held at Rich Mix in East London. At each event there is a house band in place, and several poets are programmed. The poet and band do not rehearse together, or even discuss the performance in advance. The poet gives the band an instruction before each poem, and this instruction is part of the performance – Redmond requests that it is said into the microphone so that the audience can hear. The prompt can be very specific, for instance naming a time signature, tempo and musical genre, or abstract, such as the prompt Godden gave for her Tongue Fu performance of ‘Eyes Like Woodlice’: ‘I want the sound of woodlice. That’s what I want. I want insects, naked lunch, woodlice’ which resulted in some gravelly noises from the synth player, which Godden added to with gravelly laughter, making her voice part of the insect intro soundscape [0:13]. Some poets, particularly those who do not usually work on the border of poet-musician, read or recite their poems over the top of the music, perhaps adjusting their timing as they go along in response to the band, such as Caroline Bird (‘The fairy is bored with her garden’) and Ross Sutherland (‘Horse’). Those poets who habitually work on the edge of music and poetry often fit their rendition to a beat, or the musicians might pick up on the rhythm that is already a part of their poems. Examples of poet-musicians performing at Tongue Fu include Scroobius Pip (‘Let ‘em Come’) Kate Tempest, who performs in a talk-singing register (‘War Music’) and Dizraeli (‘Boris’).

‘Limp Expectations’ demonstrates the point made by Charles Bernstein – that a poem exists in many versions, in print and in performance and there is no such thing as the ‘poem itself’ and ‘no one original written version of a poem’ (8). A version of ‘Limp Expectations’ is published in *Fishing in the Aftermath*. A comparison of this version with the Tongue Fu performance reveals the ways in which Godden improvises and how page and performance are interrelated. She almost always performs with a page or book in her hand.⁴⁹ In our interview Godden explains that this is partly because she decides on which poem to do once she’s ‘looked in the eyes of everyone in the

⁴⁹ The ‘Limp Expectations’ performance I consider in this chapter occurred before her book was published in 2014, and she holds pages.

audience’, and as she uses the page as a kind of ‘anchor’ from which she can ‘sail around and around’:

I know what I’m doing, and I dare myself to fling off a bit, throw myself off anchor a bit. [...] It’s a buffer as well. There have been times when I’ve gone on stage without any book and people have started talking to me in the middle of my poem or shouting out and then I’ve started talking to them and then I can’t remember... not necessarily heckling, just being friendly. Or shouting out and then I’ll find another chorus in my head, which stops me and then I’ve completely lost track. Even though I go off page I am on page... I change bits or new ideas come in or I start riffing. But that’s the whole point, why you’ve got to come to my gigs because you’re not going to get the same poem in the same way twice.

For Godden it is the book or page in hand that allows her to go ‘off page’ and improvise without losing the structure or skipping content. She uses the page in a similar way to how jazz musicians and improvising musicians use a score; she does not directly read from the page, but consults it, using what is written as material to riff with, and a framework within which she can improvise, adding new ideas, playing with repetition and exploring motifs. As with Malika Booker’s description of how she wrote ‘My Mother’s Blues’ (quoted in chapter one), Godden adds and takes away material in response to her audience and the live context.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone writes that in dance improvisation there is a ‘non-separation of thinking and doing’. She puts forward a concept of ‘thinking in movement’ and differentiates between thinking from the inside when improvising movement and from the outside when choreographing another dancer’s moves (30, 38, 40). The improvising poet is thinking from the inside. There is a kind of ‘thinking in writing’ that is necessary when adapting a poem to music in the way that Godden achieves in ‘Limp Expectations’. Just as Malika Booker was *thinking in writing* as she adapted her poem ‘My Mother’s Blues’ with her audience, Salena Godden is thinking in writing, from the inside, as she writes ‘Limp Expectations’ live in response to her audience and the Tongue Fu house band. Paradoxically, the presence of the page allows her to move away from the page more freely. It is not a ‘prop’ in the ways that Kei Miller comments on using his books, in order to indicate that his poetry ‘is rooted on the page’ (*Writing down the Vision* 147), but the tool that enables her to live write ‘off page’ whilst also

being ‘on page’. The fact that those poets who move away from the page most noticeably need the page in hand in order to do so (Lemn Sissay also holds his books) provides another example of how writing on the page and in performance are interconnected, differentiating poetry in performance from oral poetry and conforming that it cannot be a separate genre to ‘page poetry’.

4.2 The poet who sings

The question of whether Godden’s performance of ‘Limp Expectations’ should be analysed as a song or a poem is only relevant within a culture that differentiates between the roles of singer and poet. Kofi Anyidoho, scholar and poet from a family tradition of Ewe poets and oral artists, points out that the English words ‘poetry’ and ‘poet’ do not have African equivalents. The terms used by the Ewe of Ghana:

suggest that poetry and music tend to occur as a combined art form; invariably, the poet is also a singer, a cantor [...] the poet-singer usually performs as part of an ensemble of drummers, dancers and singers. (259)

Legacies of oral traditions in which the poet is a singer/the singer is a poet are found in British poetry.⁵⁰ In Britain the border between singer and poet is also often blurred. There are numerous poets who perform with bands, moving between song, rap and spoken word.⁵¹ In “Ways of Listening” I quote Geneva Smitherman’s description of ‘talk- singing’. Smitherman refers to the ‘black preacher’s vocalization’ as the best-known example. She describes the way ‘straightforward talk’ is combined with ‘the cadence and rhythm of traditional preaching style’. The ‘elongated articulation’ and timing creates a mode of delivery that is somewhere between speech and song (138). Smitherman comments that the preacher does not only use the mode in order to move the congregation ‘with the power of the Word’ at the ‘dramatic high point of the

⁵⁰ Whether these are direct legacies of traditions such as those described by Anyidoho, have mixed heritages in medieval English story-telling forms and lyric poetry, are influenced by poetic practices in the Caribbean and United States, or are, more simply, a common feature of many cultures past and present is difficult to determine.

⁵¹ Linton Kwesi Johnson with the Dennis Bovell Dub Band; Joshua Idehen with his ‘fro-funk’ band ‘Benin City’; Anthony Joseph and the Spasm Band (*Rubber Orchestras*); Inua Ellams often performs with musicians, such as in his show *KnightWatch* which is performed with a flute and drum duo; Zena Edwards sings and recites with musicians and plays the kalimba (‘Zena Edwards @ Book Slam’); Charlie Dark works as a musician, poet and DJ; Jemima Foxtrot often shifts between speech and song; Kate Tempest performs with a band and collaborates with record producer Dan Carey, and there are numerous other examples of hip hop/grime poet-rappers.

sermon' (138) but might also shift into talk-singing whilst 'discussing church business or finance' (139). She comments:

From a practical viewpoint, perhaps it is widely used because it is an excellent attention-getting device. The listener recognizes the shift from straight talk to talk-singing and becomes extra alert and attentive to the speaker, since the tone derives meaning from its use as a signal that the ritual of intense emotion and spirit possession is about to come down. Whether it comes down or not, the fact is that the listener is moved to sit up and take notice. (139)

Smitherman notes that talk-singing is also heard in secular settings: 'The most frequent contemporary uses are found in musical and poetic performances' (139). Talk-singing is 'found in contemporary black poetry, in the incorporation of musical lyrics and lines to be sung within the structure of a poem'. Her examples of poets include Imamu Baraka (Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones) quoting James Brown, and Haki Madhubuti who 'simulates a John Coltrane solo with poetic words' and in so doing harnesses all the associations we have of the original (141, 142). As Smitherman says, 'Talk-singing in tonal semantics achieves its meaning from the listener's association of the tone with the feeling of being "happy" and gittin the Spirit' (137). Smitherman's description of talk-singing suggests that it is not only heard in shifts in register from song to speech or speech to song, but can also be a vocalisation of speech somewhere between the two, that combines the 'cadence and rhythm' of song with a spoken register (138). Godden uses this mode of talk-singing particularly when she performs with musicians. We can hear this in 'Eyes Like Woodlice' and in an improvised performance of her poem 'I Want Love' posted on Youtube, with Max Khmmuangmool on guitar during which she performs in a register between speech and song, also including a brief song quotation.

The use of song quotation can be seen as a musical form of 'Signifyin'.⁵² Gates' seminal study *The Signifying Monkey* describes Signifyin as a practice 'at the heart of much vernacular African-American language and art'. It can function in multiple ways and evades a singular definition:

⁵² I have chosen to capitalise 'Signifyin' and spell it without the final 'g'. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates brackets the silent 'g' and capitalises the term to differentiate it from the white 'signifying' and to connote that it is a vernacular and spoken term (51). Smitherman leaves off the 'g' entirely. There is a complex relationship between the white concept of 'signification' and the black linguistic sign. They are distinct terms however they also share meanings. Gates writes that the 'two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing' (50).

This difficulty in definition is a direct result of the fact that Signifyin(g) is the black term for what in classical European rhetoric are called the figures of signification. Because to Signify is to be figurative, to define it in practice is to define it through any number of its embedded tropes. (Gates 88)

Gates traces Signifyin back to enslaved people who used lyrics to Signify on their oppressors (74). A form of repetition is often key to Signifyin. Referencing Gates' study, Potter outlines a musical mode of Signifyin:

Signifyin(g) is repetition *with a difference*; the same and yet not the same. When, in a jazz riff, a horn player substitutes one arpeggio for another in moving from key to key, or shifts a melody to what would be a harmony note, or “cuts up” a well-known solo by altering its tempo, phrasing, or accents, s/he is Signifyin(g) on all previous versions. (27)

Gates writes that Signifyin ‘is often characterized by pastiche, and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures and their differences’ (57). Within jazz, Signifyin by quoting motifs from other songs, by using repetition, by nodding to particular tropes and musical styles is all part of the art of improvisation:

Improvisation, of course, so fundamental to the very idea of jazz, is “nothing more” than repetition and revision. In this sort of revision, again where meaning is fixed, it is the realignment of the signifier that is the signal trait of expressive genius [...] It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g), jazz – and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime – and which is the source of my trope for black intertextuality in the Afro-American formal literary tradition. (Gates 70)

Paul F. Berliner, in his study of jazz improvisation based on extensive interviews with musicians, dispels the often-held belief that improvisation comes from nowhere ‘spontaneously and intuitively’ (2). Berliner’s study reveals that musicians have a whole repertoire of ‘ideas, licks, tricks, pet patterns, crips, clichés, and, in the most functional language, things you can do’ (102). In an interview with Berliner the African American

jazz singer Carmen Lundy explains how jazz singers use quotations: ‘Ella Fitzgerald will often quote from other songs in the middle of a song. She’ll sing a few lyrics and then she’ll scat sing, taking you into another song’ (103). Like the poets Smitherman refers to who quote from songs, Lundy explains that Fitzgerald improvises not by inventing lyrics but by using phrases in different patterns and splicing them together. We can see this use of quotation as a mode of Signifyin; Fitzgerald Signifies on the songs that she quotes within her improvisation. Song quotation is one of those ‘things you can do’ when improvising. The musical medley works technically when musical motifs from one song are shared with another. When a particular chord progression or melody is shared, the musician can transition smoothly between them. When a poet is not singing or working with musicians, shared language can function in the same way.

We can hear Godden using song-quotation to Signify in her performance of ‘Imagine if you had to lick it!’ when she starts singing John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’ [3:30].⁵³ It is the repetition of the word ‘imagine’ that enables a seamless transition into the quotation. Another song quotation in the version of ‘My Tits Are More Feminist Than Your Tits’ on her LiveWire album changes the lyrics of John Lennon’s song ‘Give Peace a Chance’ to: ‘All we are saying, is give tits a chance’ [4:50] – she ‘sigs’ on Lennon’s song by integrating the quotation into her poem, changing just one word. She uses song-quotation in a similar way in her ranting poem ‘Can’t be Bovvered’ when the repetition of the word ‘can’ enables her to end the poem with ‘The Can-Can’ and her audience get on their feet and sing with her. After a few verses she ends with: ‘you can, that’s why it’s called the fucking can-can... thank you!’ On the page the poem concludes with the joking shouty CAPSLOCK insult (just change one letter of ‘Can’t’): ‘CAN can can can can can can can can can... you CAN’T’ (137).

This kind of live writing is a feature of the ‘rant poem’, as Godden explains when discussing ‘Can’t be Bovvered’ in her blog for the Poetry School:

To the outsider a rant poem looks like the poet on stage is possibly losing it, repeating loops, backtracking phrases, cutting and pasting in real time, but rant poetry involves showmanship, body language and a clean intention. (‘How I did it’)

⁵³ This song-quotation is also in the page version from *Fishing in the Aftermath*, although not in quotation marks and so the silent reader might not silently sing it unless they have heard Godden’s performances (120).

We can observe this in ‘Limp Expectations’, which, like ‘Can’t be Bovvered’, encapsulates Godden’s ‘war against apathy’. She comments that she is constantly making new work, and writes ‘I get disappointed with things not going fast enough, big enough, loud enough’ (Ibid.). This is almost a line from ‘Limp Expectations’: ‘that we could do better/that we could pull in the same direction/that we could give more/that we could all do more/that we could be more’ (*Fishing* 91). The two poems are rants that function in similar ways. ‘Can’t be Bovvered’ focuses outwards, addressing the second person, and listing all the things that wouldn’t have happened in the world if noone could be bovvered: ‘if it was left up to you churches would be left half built and Neil Armstrong would still be on the moon waiting for a ride home’, whilst ‘Limp Expectations’ is in a first person and uses reverse psychology in a long rant about going ‘limp on my high expectations’ (136, 90).

In ‘Limp Expectations’, Godden uses the between song and speech mode of ‘talk-singing’. Some parts are fully song, and the odd line is fully spoken but most of the performance lies in-between. Godden describes this mode as ‘half singing seriously, half joke singing kind of gospel-y’ (interview). She reveals the instruction she gave the Tongue Fu band was to play in the style of Donny Hathaway (African American jazz, blues, soul and gospel singer, 1945-1979) and they ‘all fell into a pastiche of Donny Hathaway’ (interview). As she says, it’s a kind of ‘gospel-y’ style, reminiscent of the black preaching style that informs Smitherman’s discussion of ‘talk-singing’. Godden uses a musical form of Signifyin by selecting, and ‘siggin’ on the trope of the gospel ballad and the figure of the jazz diva. The mode (using the principle of provenance) evokes the state of feeling good, as Godden said in our interview, the poem is very ‘hallelujah’, confirming Smitherman’s observations of how talk-singing achieves meaning from the associations the listener has with it, ‘talk-singing is associated with any state of feeling good’ (138).

Godden breathes deep and belts out the song. Her voice is fully embodied, projecting forward; it is a big voice that evokes big dreams. Godden’s full psychophysical engagement likely psychophysically engaged those watching her, affecting what Fischer-Lichte describes as ‘their bodily being-in-the-world’ (125). The principle Kress and Van Leeuwen call ‘experiential meaning potential’ – that material qualities can acquire meaning ‘on the basis of our physical, bodily experience of them’ might also

come into play (74). Watching Godden fully embody her voice, engaging her lungs, projecting the sound might bring with it associated feelings of excitement, drive, ambition and aspiration – all those qualities that we associate with full blown singing. The mode of song functions as a rallying cry, a feel-good call to action. Godden imports the gospel-style blues ballad into a twenty-first century British poetry context, and with this she also imports (and Signifies on) the associations of the times, place and people who pioneered the music.

In *The Shadow and the Act*, Walton Muyumba's study of 'Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism', Muyumba writes that during the Civil Rights Movement, blues had 'the power of symbolic action' (15). When Godden sings 'that we can do more/that we can have more/that we can be more' it harnesses this history, communicating as a rallying call for action. As Muyumba points out (situating his discussion within the context of African American politics, the civil rights movement and the writings of Ellison, Baraka and Baldwin), jazz improvisation is not only a musical technique; it carries deeper significations and histories. These associations are embedded in the improvised blues form that Godden chooses as a vehicle for her poem.

A review of a jazz concert would not comment that the lyrics were sung. This is assumed; the singing itself carries no signification. We expect a singer to *sing* lyrics and therefore do not 'read' anything into the song itself as a mode of delivery. If Western culture did not differentiate between song and speech then perhaps we would not give signification to a poet singing. In *Theory of the Lyric* Jonathan Culler traces the heritage of lyric poetry from Ancient Greece when the lyric was sung with a lyre accompaniment, through the 13th and 14th centuries in Europe when there was 'a growing tradition of lyrics not meant to be sung but used, for example, for private meditation' (68). This tradition continued, 'the figure of poet as singer persists through the nineteenth century, even though few poems were song' (51). In spite of this Western heritage in which singer and poet were also often the same person, today's modern lyric poetry is no longer put to music and is traditionally analysed from the page. The role of 'poet' is considered separately to that of a 'composer' and 'singer', therefore when a poet chooses to sing, the choice is significant. Returning to the observations of the composer Michel Hirsch quoted in "Ways of Listening", as we listen to Godden, our act of listening may move between 'musical hearing and linguistic hearing' (Hirsch loc

2173). The choice to sing is as significant as writing a poem in a sonnet form, or using only one vowel sound. Godden's use of song Signifies on a particular mode of music. Because Godden's use of song is a choice, therefore part of the writing of the poem, we are prompted to consider why she has chosen to Signify on this particular mode.

Singing in the gospel style contributes meaning potential to Godden's poem, meanings that are not apparent on the page. By using a gospel blues style, Godden, performing in 21st century London, Signifies on African American culture and its history of improvising culture and identity. Jazz improvisation is not simply a form, but as Muyumba puts it, 'an African American vernacular language that aids musical and philosophical inquiry' (19). Godden uses the blues idiom as a 'language system' that helps her to narrate 'personal, social, and political desires' (15). It communicates Godden's 'faith in humanity and in all the good stuff' (interview). At the same time, she is not a gospel singer but is employing the mode for its associations, using this form of musical Signifyin as part of her 'writing' of the poem in performance. Godden uses the blues form as a vehicle to communicate her faith in humanity and idealism, whilst the element of pastiche and homage in her performance allows her to comment on this idealism.

4.3 Analysis of 'Limp Expectations'

As Godden explains in our interview, her work as a writer is not finished once the poem is written on the page, it has multiple lives in multiple versions, and each performance is different: 'when I do my poems live they're definitely moveable feasts, like jazz'.

Godden's performance of 'Limp Expectations' at 'Tongue Fu' provides an example of the ways in which she 'writes live'. Godden improvises both as a musician, creating melody and rhythm for her poem, and as a writer, re-composing her text, riffing and repeating sections to fit the musical structure, using the methods of ranting poetry that she explained in her discussion of 'Can't be Bovvered': 'repeating loops, backtracking phrases, cutting and pasting in real time' ('How I did it').

Godden instructs the band to 'play like it's your last time playing', in the style of Donny Hathaway (interview). The prompt produces a dramatic, earnest gospel style blues ballad at 60bpm in 4/4, reminiscent of Hathaway tracks such as 'A Song For You'. 'Limp Expectations' is a call to action; it is a ballad against giving up. The semantic

content of the poem is all about having low expectations. However, the strong ‘hallelujah’ gospel mode of delivery makes clear that this is the opposite of what Godden will do and what she is calling upon her audience to do. The collocation clash in the title ‘Limp Expectations’ sets up the clash between the semantics of the language and the intention throughout the poem. ‘Limp’ is a weak, giving up kind of word, whilst ‘expectations’ drives forward in a hopeful way. ‘Limp’ is a physical word; a limp body is the epitome of a person who has given up. ‘Limp’ is a word that can be embodied in a way the more common ‘low’ [expectations] cannot.

In a phrase similar to Van Leeuwen’s definition of ‘provenance’, Gates writes (crediting the research of his university classmate James Snead)⁵⁴:

when you repeat a prior work of art, you bring it and all its connotations back, so that there are always two dimensions, past and present, repetition and revision, working at the same time (xxxix).

Godden brings all the connotations of a ‘hallelujah’ gospel song into her poem, and as Gates writes, this means that there are two dimensions to her performance working at the same time. This use of Signifyin works particularly well in this iteration, as Godden’s use of song allows her to belt out the subtext of the poem so that it delivers her intention with all the energy and enthusiasm that the words tell us she has given up on. Following the conventions of blues, the musicians structure the performance in eight bar phrases. The eight bar phrase is intuitive for Godden, who has worked with musicians throughout her career – she starts her poem after an eight bar introduction, and adds repetitions and riffs in order to fit the structure of her poem into the eight bar sequence. As Berliner’s study reveals, improvisation is rarely totally free; improvising musicians work within fixed structures, such as the eight bar sequence, freestyling poets and improvising musicians often pull from an existing vocabulary of patterns, phrases and various ‘things you can do’ (102). As well as the ways Godden adapts the structure of her poem to fit the music, repeating phrases and adjusting lines, other aspects of this performance can be viewed through the lens of live writing: her choice to sing, the vocal quality of her voice, and her use of gesture and body. Live writing is not only

⁵⁴ Gates refers to Snead’s essay ‘Repetition as a figure of black culture’ in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. Snead writes: ‘whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we are indeed not viewing ‘the same thing’ but its transformation, not just a formal ploy but often the willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history’ (‘Repetition’ 59-60).

evidenced in live composition (those poets who do not change lines in performance also engage in live writing) but also in all of the conscious performance choices made by the poet.

Below is a transcript of 'Limp Expectations' as it appears in Godden's collection, *Fishing in the Aftermath* (90-91). Alongside it is a transcript of the 'Tongue Fu' performance, from the Youtube video posted on the 8th July 2014 for Tongue Fu Flicks. As my analysis is of the recorded performance, this transcription is only to give an initial visual sense of the differences between the two. The transcribed version maintains the same line breaks as the published version where possible and I have tried to avoid imposing line breaks where they do not appear in the published version. This transcription is not the version that Godden has written for the page, and my analysis is not of the transcript but of the recorded performance. The biggest difference that viewing the transcription alongside the published version reveals is the length: the published poem is 514 words; the performed poem is 813 words. Godden adds riffs and repetitions to adapt the poem to a musical form.⁵⁵

Repetition works differently in performance to on the page. On the page a repeated line can be 'read silently' (or out loud) in different ways, and its repetition will add emphasis to the content, depending on the reader, but it still looks exactly the same as it did the first time. The difference is not the words that make up the line but our re-encountering of the line, to which we may bring our own silent emphases and meanings. In performance the 'same' line can be transformed totally through vocal quality, pitch, rhythm, speed and dynamic, giving different potential meanings. In a sense, the performed version is far more 'authored'; the meaning of the line is bound up in the performance of it. This of course is a broad point and one of the big differences between experiencing a performance of a poem, and reading it silently (and out loud) from the page. The transcription gives a general sense of the amount of repetition and improvisation in the poem and how Godden uses the page as 'anchor'. She holds the A4 page in her hand.

The sections that differ from the page and have been 'written live' to fit the musical

⁵⁵ Although I am only analysing this particular instance of performance, I have seen Godden performing the poem on several other occasions. At the British Library conference *Talking Liberties: Ranting poets, zines and angry kids of the '80s'* Godden performed without musical accompaniment, and did not include the riffs and repetitions that can be heard in the Tongue Fu version.

structure are in bold font. The talk-singing lines are in italics. I have underlined words and lines where she uses a distinctive vocal quality that I describe with the term ‘grain’. My use of the word ‘grain’ is a nod towards Roland Barthes’ use of the descriptor in his essay ‘The Grain of the Voice’. He describes the grain as when you can hear the ‘materiality of the body’ in a singer’s voice (182). My use of the term is perhaps more literal than Barthes’. I use it to indicate a gravelly, grainy, raspy, sometimes phlegmy rough vocal sound. Listening to Godden’s performance will clarify what I mean by the descriptor. I have also noted some of her more notable gestures in brackets, although she uses headshakes and hair tosses throughout.

I'm gonna go limp on my high expectations
and dream small dreams.
Gonna go limp on my high expectations
and dream tiny tidy dreams.
Stop going over the top, reel myself in,
teach myself to stop before I even begin.
Gonna stop getting carried away
with wanting my own way, with having a say,
dream small dreams, have no expectations,
no more daydreaming my days away.
You could write my tiny tidy dreams
on a grain of rice, on a piece of ice,
on an ant's eyelash, on an amoeba's moustache.
I know everything that happens happens for a reason.
That's a good reason to stop anything happening, stop,
stop this dream, I'm getting off.
I'm gonna have low expectations, so low,
no expectations, so low, gonna go solo, so low.
I'm gonna dream small and achievable dreams.
I wanted some milk, I went to the shop,
I bought a pint of milk, my dream is achieved.
Gonna go limp on my high-faluting expectations
and dream miniscule dreams.
Gonna take small steps, tiny steps,
I'm gonna wanna take steps backwards,
two steps backwards and no steps forwards.
In fact, why don't you come sit on the end of my bed
and tell me what to dream at night?
Sit on the end of my bed and tell me what to dream
just so I know I am getting my dreams small enough,
tiny and tidy enough, right.
I'm gonna stop assuming
people have the same priorities as me,
gonna stop pushing and pulling the forces around me, stop
expecting people to have the same energy as me, stop
expecting people to have any, any energy.
I will not resent this – but go with the flow.
I am going to go so slow and go with the flow, solo, so
low. I will not swim against the tide
or upset the apple-cart or make any waves.
I'm just here for the ride, so please take a photo,
tag it on my Facebook.
This is a picture of me giving up and letting go.
I had a dream, past tense had, had a dream,
but it was so small and undernourished,
barely worth mentioning.
I'm no longer frozen by fear of success.
I'm no longer frozen by fear of failure
I expect neither, success nor failure,
I know it's the taking part that counts
and I am fine with that.
Gonna weaken my grip on wanting anything,
stop holding onto my high expectations,
my fancy ideas, fancy-shmancy dream,
my great expectation
that we could do better,
that we could pull in the same direction,
that we could give more,
that we could all do more,
that we could be more.
I challenge nothing and I challenge nobody.
I accept you all and I accept all of this, all of you.
Gonna take life as it comes and accept my hand.
Gonna take myself home and lock my box,
lock myself in a box inside another box,
and in the glow of no hope of no change
I will perhaps one day forgive myself
for giving up.

(Piano INTRO: Over first 4 bars: fist pump, small head shake and
nods, melodic humming. Over second 3 bars: bigger head/hair toss on
the beat)

I'm gonna go limp on my high expectations
and dream small dreams **yeah**
I wanna go (wrist flop) limp (finger shake) on my high expectations
and dream tiny **tiny** tidy dreams.
I'm gonna stop going over the top, I'm gonna reel myself in,
I'm gonna teach myself to stop before I even begin.
Gonna dream tiny tiny tiny tidy dreams
*I'm gonna stop getting carried away
with wanting my own way, with having a say,*
I'm gonna dream small dreams, no expectations,
[1:28] **I'm gonna stop** daydreaming my days away. (*head toss*) Hey
You know you could write my dream
on a grain of rice, on a piece of ice,
on an ant's eyelash, on an amoeba's moustache.
(*hair/head shake*) **hey yeah yeah**
coz I know everything that happens happens for a reason.
That's a good reason to stop anything happening ever, stop,
stop this dream, I'm getting off. [2:02]
I'm gonna have low expectations, **no expectations** so low,
no expectations, so low, **I'm gonna go solo,**
I'm gonna go solo I'm gonna go so low. I'm gonna go so low
I'm gonna dream achievable dreams.
I wanted a **pint of milk** and I **went to the shop and I got me** [2:24]
a pint of milk, (*finger lick, in air –chalking up a point*) dream
achieved. **I'm gonna go limp** on my high-faluting expectations
I'm gonna dream miniscule dreams,
tiny tiny tiny tiny tidy dreams yeah!
I'm gonna take small steps, nah I don't
wanna take any steps, I wanna take steps backwards, yeah
I want to take steps backwards yeah
two steps backwards and no steps forwards.
*In fact er, in fact er, why don't you all sit on the end of my bed
and tell me what to dream at night?*
so I can make sure I dream my dreams
nice and small and tidy and right.
Sit on the end of my bed every single one of you
and make sure that I'm dreaming that I'm dreaming right **yeah**
I'm gonna dream tiny tiny dreams
I'm gonna have achievable achievable dreams
tiny tiny tiny dreams ... [3:40]
*and I'm gonna stop assuming
that people have the same priorities as me, [3:40]*
*I'm gonna stop assuming
that people have the same priorities as me,*
I'm gonna stop pushing and pulling the forces around me,
I'm gonna stop expecting people to have the same energy as me,
I'm gonna stop expecting people to have any, any energy.
you know any, any energy, that's what I'm gonna do yeah
I will stop expecting people to have any, any energy.
and I will not resent this – you know I will go with the flow.
I'm gonna go with the flow
I'm gonna have limp tiny expectations, (wrist flop) no expectations
limpid expectations, I'm gonna dream miniscule
dreams tiny tiny tiny tidy dreams
I will not swim against the tide
I'm just here for the ride, you may as well just take a photo
of me going so low so low, tag it on my Facebook.
This is a picture of me giving up and letting go, **yeah**
Hey. I had a dream, past tense, had a dream,
(*thumb indicates backwards*) (*blow out*) **past tense...**
[4:56] *but it was so small and undernourished,
it's barely worth mentioning.*
[5:00] I am no longer frozen by fear of success.
I am no longer frozen by fear of failure
because I expect neither, fear nor success
because I know it's the taking part that counts
and I'm fine with that. [**laugh**] **you know I'm really** [5:08]
really fine with that yeah, I'm really fine with that
I'm gonna weepen...weepen? **I'm not gonna weep**
I'm gonna weaken my grip on wanting anything,
I'm gonna stop holding onto my high expectations,
my fancy ideas, my fancy-shmancy dream,
my great expectation
*that we could do better,
that we could pull in the same direction,
that we could share the same dream
that we could have a great expectation
that we could do more, that we could share more
that we could be more that we could do more
that we could give more that we could have more oh*
I challenge nothing and I challenge nobody.
I accept you all and I accept all of this, I
I accept it all I accept my hand I accept everything
*I'm just gonna take myself home and lock myself up in a little box,
(box gestures) and I'm gonna lock that box up in another box*
and I'm gonna lock that box in another box, and then
I'm gonna sit there in the glow of no hope of no change
of no hope and no change and hope
that one day I will forgive myself for giving up **yeah**
giving up is easy yeah
giving up giving up giving up so easy...
giving up... easy... it's so easy giving up **I don't know why**
I didn't try it before giving up so easy come with me
we can all give up together come on lets go get a
job in a bank you and me. Thank you

Listening to the performance alongside the above transcription clarifies the ways Godden slips between song and ‘talk-singing’. I have identified talk-singing as when she drops out of melody (becoming microtonal like speech rather than tonal like music) but continues to fit into the 4/4 time signature. Although I have picked out the most notable places where this occurs, in fact her mode of delivery could be described as talk-singing throughout. She often talk-sings around a narrow cluster of pitches rather than full-blown tonal singing (such as at minute five: ‘I am no longer frozen by fear of success. I am no longer frozen by fear of failure, because I expect neither, fear nor success because I know it’s the taking part that counts’). Although her entire performance could be described as talk-singing, the differentiation made above reveals subtle shifts between modes and how her ability to slide between speech and song is one of the features of her live writing.

Where I transcribe the performance version below I use lines that correspond to the 4/4 bar (as Godden performs) rather than the same lineation as the page version. This helps reveal the way she adapts the poem to fit the musical structure. Although I transcribe the performed version after the page version, there is no authoritative version, and of course Godden performed this poem for years before publishing it in this particular way. Neither is ‘the’ version, but it is interesting to compare as it reveals the places where performance either requires or enables Godden to riff or ‘write live’, as well as revealing the ways a four beat bar differs to a line. A line break can shift the meaning of a line, guide our eye down the page in a particular way, and in free verse it can be of varied length, dictated not by metre but by the language and content. Although many of the lines as written on the page could be said to have four stresses, we cannot say that it is in tetrameter or any other metre. One line does not correspond to one bar – it is not metrical in this sense, however, in performance Godden adapts the poem to fit to a four beat bar. The four beat bar is a fixed structure, it must always be the same length, the freedom is found in the way in which the syllables of speech come between and on the unmoveable beat.

I have adjusted my notation below to focus on the musical structure. Talk-singing lines are still indicated in italics, and the ‘grain’ vocal quality is still underlined, however, my use of bold font below no longer indicates the material that deviates from the page version (this is made clear by the inclusion of the page-published line before the

performed line). I indicate where the beat falls by putting the relevant syllable in bold font or, when the beat comes between syllables, placing ‘**B**’ in the relevant location. Where her breath is audible and feels part of her live writing I have indicated it in square brackets – [I] for inhalation and [E] for exhalation. I am not using musical notation as my focus is on performance rather than transcription. My transcription helps to indicate what I am hearing and shows how she works within the 4/4 time signature. Each line in my transcription is the length of the 4/4 bar in performance. My more detailed observations about her use of rhythm can be confirmed by listening to the performance (I include timings from the Youtube video). The 4/4 time signature is emphasised throughout the performance by piano chords on the beat, apart from the ‘bridge’ section (where the piano does not play). Similar to hip hop and rap artists, who demonstrate their individual style in the way they syncopate their delivery and do not coincide with the beat, Godden starts her phrases on the offbeat and often uses triplets to play against the strong 4/4 pulse (a triplet fits three notes into the time of two, for instance three quavers in the time of two quavers), this gives the jazzy sense of push and pull against the main beat. Here is the opening line:

I’m gonna go limp on my high expectations [0:47]

B I’m gonna go **limp** on my **high** expectations and

Godden opens with rhythmic tropes that she continues using throughout. She does not start on the first beat of the bar, but just after. By not aligning ‘I’m gonna go’ with the first beat of the bar and placing ‘limp’ on the second beat she emphasises the word ‘limp’. This strong delivery contradicts the semantic meaning of the word. The choice brings out the intention of the poem right from the beginning – it is clear that she means the direct opposite to what she says. Her use of triplets (three quavers in the time of two) for ‘high expect’ and ‘tations and’ gives the jazzy, bluesy feel to the line. The next line has more prominent syncopation; none of the words coincide with the beat:

and dream small dreams. [0:50]

B dream **B** small dreams **B** yeah [E]

The addition of ‘yeah’ and the exhalation [E] become a part of the line in performance. Next, Godden repeats the opening line but she does not repeat the rhythm:

Gonna go limp on my high expectations [0:55]

B I wanna go **limp** [*pause*] **B** on my high expectations and

On this repetition Godden leaves a pause after the word 'limp'. The pause is long enough for the third beat of the bar to fall in the pause, moving the fourth beat to fall on the second (rather than third) syllable of 'expectations', creating syncopation by putting the emphasis in a place that goes against the standard intonation of the word.

The long pause after 'limp' allows Godden to emphasise the word further through her physicality. She demonstrates 'limp' with a flop of a limp wrist and a shake of her fingers. By executing this gesture in the pause she is giving it as much importance as a word. Viewing Godden's performance through the lens of poetry gives her choice to sing particular signification as part of live writing. The same applies to Godden's use of gesture. If Godden were an actor then we would not consider this gesture a part of her live writing, but as the director's choice, or just a nice detail in the acting of an existing script. When the poet uses gesture consciously as part of her performance, this gesture becomes a part of the live writing, a part of the poem.

Godden achieves such effective Signifyin by employing her mode of delivery, vocal quality, language and gesture as separate strands of her live writing. She applies sincere and highly motivated and effortful singing to language about giving up. The gravelly, raspy voice I describe as 'grain' is imported from the jazz singer mode. Although she executes this just like an accomplished jazz singer, when it is combined with the content, such as 'I wanted a pint of milk and I went to the shop and I got me a pint of milk (*finger lick, in air*) dream achieved [2:24], the commitment and intensity that the grainy vocal quality contributes to her voice works as tonal satire of the content. Her use of gesture provides a third strand. It is typical for singers to emphasise speech with gesture; Godden's physicality does not function in this way, but adds a strand of meaning to her performance. She uses her body to Signify on the tropes of the jazz singer.

Godden's physicality signals that she is not a gospel-blues singer by Signifyin on the singer's performance mode itself. She does this by accentuating features of the 'hallelujah' gospel singer, and the heightened dramatic preacher mode that is the heritage of this style of gospel-blues, such as the fist pump and look to the sky, the

head-shake during the opening hummed intro and the over exaggerated hair toss. A combination of factors signal that this hair toss is a playful kind of Signifyin: Godden tosses vertically, she does not have hair in her eyes in the first place, and her expression shows that she is absolutely present, that she is performing being overcome by the moment very consciously rather than being genuinely taken up by the emotion of the music and sentiment. The limp wrist flop also signals parody and brings out the humour of Godden's poem. This is not a glamorous move and not a gesture that a jazz singer would make. Although she sounds absolutely sincere as a vocalist, her body reveals that she is consciously using the mode as a tool to create meaning. The pathos and comedy of the gesture, with its little finger shake after the limp flop tells us that she's not really about to go limp, that this is an attitude to be ridiculed. She looks at her limp wrist and gives her fingers a little shake, as if to say: *seriously? You're gonna go 'limp'?* Perhaps her self-aware gestures also 'sigs' on the absurdity of the music industry itself, the fakeness of the choreography, the simulating of big feeling. It could also be seen as a bit of tongue-in-cheek Signifyin on the boast and braggadocio form of hip hop influenced spoken word poets: rather than boasting about how great she is and how much she's going to do, Godden sings and speaks enthusiastically about striving to do much less (even though we all know she's never gonna stop).

She continues:

and dream tiny tidy dreams.

[1:00]

B dream **tiny** tiny **B** tidy dreams

She adds a repetition of the word 'tiny'

Stop going over the top, reel myself in,

[1:04]

B *I'm gonna stop* going over the **top**, **B** *I'm gonna*

In performance she begins with 'I'm gonna', which continues the rhythmic repetition of starting just after the first beat of the bar. The word 'stop' is emphasised by its placement on the second beat, and additionally by her stressed pronunciation, and by using 'talk-singing' on this line. By placing 'top' on the beat she also foregrounds the

rhyme.

[1:06]

reel myself **in**, I'm gonna **teach** myself to **stop** before I
even **begin**. **B** Gonna dream **B** tiny
B tiny **B** tidy **tiny** dreams **B**

The bar beginning 'reel' is composed of a triplet ('reel myself') followed by three groups of four semiquavers ('in I'm gonna', 'teach myself to', 'stop before I'). The line stretches into the next bar into another triplet ('even be'). The sequence ends on the 'gin' of 'begin' and coincides with the beat. Semantically, 'begin' means begin, but in the context of a line about *stopping before beginning*, it means ending, or not even starting. The conclusiveness in this refusal to begin is emphasised by placing the word on the beat and sustaining it to the length of a dotted crotchet (after a sequence of semiquavers and triplets). By stretching the line across two bars, Godden is able to begin the final line of the eight bar phrase half way through the penultimate bar, which breaks the pattern she established earlier, when '**B** dream **tiny** tiny **B** tidy **dreams**' was a bar in itself. By starting the final line of the eight bar phrase 'gonna dream tiny tiny tidy tiny dreams' half way through the penultimate bar of the phrase, she has time to add the additional 'tiny' – at the end of the penultimate bar on an offbeat, which sets up the syncopation of tiny and tidy that occurs at the beginning of the final bar in the phrase.

This adjustment of phrasing and the insertion of the additional word demonstrates how Godden improvises with her script in order to adapt her poetic form to the musical eight bar phrase on the spot. She is writer and musician in the same moment, re-writing her poem on the spot to fit the musical phrase. A further example of how Godden improvises with her lines is found below, when what is one line on the page becomes four bars in performance through word play and repetition:

no expectations, so low, gonna go solo, so low.

[2:03]

B I'm gonna have **B** low expectations no expectations,
so low, **B** no expectations so **low** I'm gonna
go so low **B** I'm gonna **go** solo **B** I'm gonna go

B so low **B** I'm gonna go **B** so low

Godden plays with where she places the stress, moving it between 'go' 'so' and 'low' and shifting from **expectations** to **expectations**. Again she stretches the line and improvises in order to fit the language into the eight bar musical phrase. In performance her line 'I'm gonna go solo' acquires additional meaning, as that is what she is doing as singer-poet, she is taking a solo. This is an example of what she calls 'riffing', and what Geneva Smitherman has described as 'play on words', a part of the 'language and style that comprise the sacred-secular oral tradition [of 'Black English']' (94).

The following is an example of 'talk-singing':

Gonna take small steps, tiny steps,
I'm gonna wanna take steps backwards,
two steps backwards and no steps forwards.

[2:46]

B I'm gonna take *small* steps, **B nah**

B I don't wanna take *any* steps, **B** I wanna *take* steps

*back***B**wards, yeah **B** I want to *take* steps *back***B**wards yeah

In performance it seems as if she is writing these lines on the spot, the speech tone contrasts with the previous sung lines and gives the impression of improvisation. The beat lands just between the syllables of 'backwards', giving a loose, improvisatory feel to her talk-singing. The use of 'nah...' suggests she has changed her mind in the moment, and the use of 'yeah' confirms her thoughts as they (appear to) arise. This use of speech within the song allows her to create an intimacy with her audience; the spoken (talk-sung) parts appear to be written live for this particular audience. This works to an even greater extent when she implicates her audience in her dream and asks them to 'sit on the end of my bed':

In fact, why don't you come sit on the end of my bed
and tell me what to dream at night?
Sit on the end of my bed and tell me what to dream

[3:00]

In fact, er, [I] [E] in fact [EW]:⁵⁶ er, why don't

***you all sit on the end of my bed and tell me what to dream at night?** So I can
make sure I **dream** my dreams nice and **small** and tidy **B** and right*

***B** Sit on the end of my **bed** every single one of you and **make** sure that I'm
dreaming, **B** that I'm dreaming*

right

This section (transcribed above) is what I've described as the 'bridge', in which the piano chords come out, and the role of keeping the beat is taken over by the percussion, making the 4 beat per bar rhythm less prominent. In this section Godden fits more words into the bar (as is evident in the fact I had to reduce the size of font above to fit the bar on one line) and the clarity of the beat is slightly lost (and harder to identify). Again the 'er' sounds suggest she has just come up with this idea and she is directly asking her audience to take part in her small dreams. An obvious adjustment for the page is her use of 'you' rather than 'you all'. Of course the reader of the book is singular whilst her audience is plural. The 'you all' brings her audience into the present of her poem, similar to when in 'Imagine if you have to lick it!' she asked her audience to look at the person next to them and imagine... She uses the talk-singing mode as part of her live writing, signalling how 'live' the moment is, that the 'you' she refers to are the people in front of her and not some abstract 'you' imagined in the past.

At minute five Godden uses repetition to add meaning potential to the poem. She repeats a line that is not repeated in the page version, presumably because on the page she cannot communicate the attitude behind the words through emphasis, grainy use of voice, laughter and pitch:

I know it's the taking part that counts
and I am fine with that.

[5:09]

[**B**] and I'm **fine** with that. [laugh] [**B**] you know I'm really,

[**B**] really **fine** with that **yeah**, [**B**] I'm really

⁵⁶ [EW] indicates that Godden exhales the 'er' sound.

fine with that

Her bitter laugh, her sustained mid range pitch, the vocal quality of talk-singing through gritted teeth, the use of repetition to over-state the point, the second ‘really’ with its stressed [iil] sound, the ‘grain’ vocal quality on ‘you know’, and the emphasis of ‘fine’ on the beat with its stressed [f] sound, all demonstrate how she really, really isn’t ‘fine with that’.

The next line is an interesting example of live writing and the ways in which mistakes can be productive. Godden says ‘I’m gonna weapen... weepen? I’m not gonna weep I’m gonna weaken my grip on wanting anything’ [5:20]. Putting this on the page implicates me as a writer; there is no page version of this slight slip, and I’ve made a choice to try two spellings of her accidental neologism weapen/weepen, a choice informed by the way she repeats the word and comments ‘I’m not gonna weep’. The slip coins a new word, ‘weapen’, a combination of ‘weep’ and ‘weaken’. Her commentary on the mistake (‘I’m not gonna weep’) reveals that she is not on autopilot (performing in an automatic kind of ‘Poet Voice’), she is listening to herself as she performs. She is in the moment of ‘live writing’ enough to comment on her mistake in a productive way. Another notable example of writing that happens live occurs at the end and the run up to the end, when the dynamic builds, the repetition builds, and she uses more vocalised ‘yeah’ sounds:

[5:45]

have a great **expectation** that we could **[B]** do more, **[B]** that we could
share more **[B]** that we could be **[B]** more, **that** we could do
more that **we** could give more **[B]** that we could **[B]** have more **[B]** [*sung ‘Oh...’*
for rest of bar...]

Here the syncopation builds, the beats are mostly between words, the construction of the line is repeated and repetition is used as a form of rhyme (do more/share more/be more/do more etc). This is a very different kind of chain rhyme/use of repetition as rhyme to that discussed in “Spoken Word Voice”. Here Godden shifts the timing (as well as pitch) for each repetition, so rather than giving the sense that a particular intonation pattern is being repeated, she creates a build in tension and excitement through raising the pitch and shifting the place where syncopation occurs on each

repetition. On the first line above, the fourth beat comes just before ‘that we could’, on the second line the beat comes on the ‘that’, bringing the rhythm forward this tiny amount raises the tension, the anticipation and urgency of this call to action.

Although ‘Limp Expectations’ is not fully composed live on the spot, Godden’s use of repetition, and insertion of words and asides give the impression that she is writing the poem live. The audience feel involved in her thinking and writing process as it happens. Although Godden has the page in her hand (until she drops it a few minutes later), the page does not signal that she is a ‘page poet’ reading something that has been written and re-written in solitude months earlier: her use of voice, her ability to work on the border of poet-musician, and the way she addresses her audience all suggest that she is writing the poem live. Moving into the final stanza Godden drops the page [6:05] and improvises, ‘lock that box up in another box’ and plays with repetition and tiny box shape gestures (which are easier to make without a page in hand). Finally, [6:21] she goes beyond the end of the poem as it appears on the page: ‘I will perhaps one day forgive myself/for giving up’ (91), and creates a kind of ‘tag’, an eight bar coda playing with the repetition of ‘giving up’ using the ‘grain’ vocal quality until the end. The final line: ‘come on let’s go get a job in a bank, you and me, thank you’ was improvised for this particular performance and is not part of the printed version of the poem (and I have not heard her use it at the end of other performances either). She delivers it in a conversational mode, perhaps adding it to conclude the poem after the riffing on ‘giving up’. She includes the final ‘thank you’ as part of her final line: ‘thank you’ comes at the beginning of the final bar, leaving three piano chords to finish after her.

This analysis reveals how Godden ‘riffs’ on her text, using the page as an ‘anchor’. It demonstrates her ability as writer-musician to adapt her lines on the spot to a musical structure, and to do this in ways that emphasise and create meaning. We can see how she works with syncopation within a four beat bar to pull out the humour and meanings of her poem. It shows how she works with her vocal quality and gesture, using these performative tools to convey meanings through musical and gestural Signifyin alongside her use of language. Godden shifts between modes of speech and song, and changes the quality of her voice from ‘grain’ to conversational to talk-singing, demonstrating how the materiality of the voice can be ‘written’ live in performance. As Fischer-Lichte summarises:

The materiality of the voice reveals the performance's materiality in its entirety. The voice captures tonality as it resounds in space; it emphasizes corporeality because it leaves the body through respiration; it marks spatiality because its sound flows out into the space and enters the ears of spectators and articulating subjects alike. (129)

We can observe all of this in Godden's performance. Her entire body becomes part of her writing, her voice is amplified by her physicality, her corporeality is amplified through her breath, she exploits the physicality of her vocal delivery throughout and this impacts the spectators' experiences of her performance. The musical accompaniment and the structure imposed by it make performing on autopilot impossible. Godden must 'write live' as she needs to adapt and adjust her poem live to fit the four beat bars and eight bar phrases. The strands that Godden writes with: voice, use of body, content of the poem, are woven together in her live writing. It is the fact that she is a poet choosing to deliver a poem through song, rather than a singer whose singing is not a choice but is taken for granted, that mean Godden's use of voice and gesture can be seen as musical modes of Signifyin. Godden's performance choices are a part of the live writing of the poem, carrying signification and contributing to the meaning potential of the poem. When woven together, these strands of physicality, vocal production, music, and content create an experience of the poem for her audience that is only available as live writing.

Chapter five

David J's Vocal Pugilism

5.1 Introducing David J "Vocal Pugilist"

David J "vocal pugilist" developed his craft in the verbal battle rings of a South London estate in the eighties and nineties. His discourse is full of boxing, 'pugilist' imagery; in our interview he explains he grew up 'in a battle arena', break dancing, graffiti-ing and verbally fighting. He learnt the art of vocal sparring by going 'to where there were no lights' in order to 'battle that person on the estate'. He describes how these verbal battles have rounds just like a boxing match, and necessitate the development of 'weaponry' and 'armour' and the importance of 'working on various techniques in order to defend yourself and obviously get your message out over your opponent or oppressor'. He remembers 'when battles were taking place you'd be called'. Potter notes:

If there is a field in which hip-hop's revolution will be fought, it will be first and foremost that of language, a fact that is underlined by the recurrent metaphoric mixture of rappers' own technologies (microphones, pencils, and tongues) with those of armed struggle (guns, hand grenades, artillery). (64)

In our interview David J talks about the local respect he enjoyed when he won rap battles as a young person: 'Your family gets respected on the block'. He developed his extensive verbal weaponry and 'armour' as a young man not to earn money as a professional performer, but to earn prestige and respect from his peers. As Richard Bramwell observes in his study of UK hip hop, the rapper's linguistic skills help young people 'achieve social recognition' (5).

Interviewed by Jonathan Akwue, the poet and journalist Musa Okwonga describes David J as one of the pioneers of the 'spoken-word scene in London'. Okwonga summarises his performance style: 'David J intertwines provocative verses with vocal sound effects, using his body as part of his performance' (qtd. Akwue). The variety of David J's vocal techniques demonstrate that the influence of hip hop does not result in a particular 'spoken word voice', but can be the basis for a hugely varied performance

technique. If delivering every line and every poem with the same prosodic features reduces the way a poet's performance can be viewed through the lens of live writing, then David J's expansive repertoire of vocal techniques and modes of delivery does the opposite. This chapter includes interview material and close listening to David J's performances to reveal how he 'writes live' through vocal techniques, use of breath and hip hop battle-influenced freestyling. As part of my close listening to David J's poem 'This is What We Do' I have annotated the audiovisual recording of his performance. This annotation demonstrates the range and sheer quantity of David J's vocal techniques and complements my taxonomy and the analysis of 'This is What We Do' that follows.

David J is my only case study without a parallel poetic practice on the page. He has not published his poetry in print and does not express interest in doing so in our interview. He does not use social media and rarely publishes videos online, although others have posted recordings of his performances and short interviews. David J has had an impressive career, and is known amongst poets (such as Kate Tempest, Joshua Idehen and Musa Okwonga) as a legend of British spoken word, however, he is not mentioned by any of the academics who have written about poetry in performance, spoken word or UK hip hop. The younger poets I have worked with (such as Barbican Young Poets and Mouthy Poets in Nottingham) are mostly unaware of his work, as he kept a low profile for a number of years, although continued performing in the Midlands at events organised by Mohammed Aerosol Arabic.⁵⁷ I saw David J perform for the first time at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in 2016 alongside Anthony Joseph, Amy Evans and Holly Pester at an event programmed by Kayo Chingonyi, unusually bringing together avant-garde 'white' and 'black' poets and poetics. An analysis of David J's performances is important not only to reveal how vocal techniques and freestyling can contribute to a discussion of live writing, but also as a record of his work. Within this chapter I draw from our ninety minute interview as it is a unique record of the development of his performance techniques, and also provides an insight into the little publicly documented world of hip hop in London in the eighties.

I focus on two aspects of David J's work: The first is the way he composes his poetry live in performance, freestyling 'off the dome'. The second is the way he employs vocal techniques and varies his delivery modes. The two aspects are connected; he draws

⁵⁷ Mohammed Ali (known as 'Aerosol Arabic' is a curator and street artist known for his use of Islamic script and geometric designs. He founded the arts organisation 'Soul City Arts' in Birmingham.

from a pool of vocal techniques as part of his freestyling. Like Salena Godden, David J draws from different delivery modes and vocal qualities as part of his ‘live writing’, however, his vocal techniques are so extensive that their discussion has required me to make a taxonomy of descriptions, definitions and examples. Analysing David J’s work requires a close listening to the detail of his delivery, his use of breath and voice. From this close listening I identify a list of terms that might otherwise be coined over the culmination of watching dozens of other poets who use the voice in unusual ways. In effect he has created his own kind of language, a form of wordplay which draws on vocal effects and mirrors technological manipulations of the voice rather than drawing on multiple Englishes, but that demonstrates the kind of playfulness and awareness of the musicality and percussive qualities of language that David Dabydeen describes in reference to his own use of creole in *Slave Song* (quoted in chapter one). In the first part of this chapter I discuss David J’s work in the context of important milestones of his career and a discussion of freestyling. Building on the discussion of improvisation, I trace some of the heritages of David J’s freestyling and consider how his vocal techniques are part of his use of ‘tonal semantics’. Following the taxonomy of his vocal techniques, I apply this vocabulary and the discussion on freestyling to an analysis of his performance ‘This is What We Do’.

5.2 ‘The wisdom from those elders’ (David J interview)

David J is spoken of by other poets as a kind of mythical presence, dressed in white suit, cloak and hat, sweeping through an event then liable to disappear for years, address unknown. His own vimeo page, presumably self-penned describes him(self) as ‘an elusive character very hard to locate’. David J’s persona as an elusive legend, a lyrically armed ‘pugilist’ demonstrates one of the tropes of a rapper that Adam Bradley, in *Book of Rhymes, the Poetics of Hip-hop* (a study focusing on American hip-hop) describes: ‘rap often relies upon the construction of a larger-than-life persona, an outlaw hero with superhuman aptitudes and appetites’ (191). We can see this ‘larger-than-life persona’ in David J’s performance at OneTaste’s debut show at KOKO London.⁵⁸ David J enters the stage barefoot, walking in slow motion, wearing a white suit and fedora, with a

⁵⁸ ‘The OneTaste Collective formed at 2007’s UK summer festivals when OneTaste handpicked a diverse group of musicians and poets to take on tour with ambient festival venue Chai Wallahs. Over three mud-glazed, ad hoc and creatively fertile months, the artists hosted late night freestyle shows, a collaborative goldmine of rhythms, words and inspired performance. They packed out shows wherever they played, earning them the reputation as the unstoppable OneTaste Collective’ (onetaste.co.uk).

green army style coat on his shoulders. As he reaches centre stage he sheds this cloak and slips into white shoes.

In our interview David J tells a story that may reveal the origins of this slow motion entry. He describes an event in 2007 (three years earlier) in which he performed before the renowned African American poet, Amiri Baraka. David J had responded to an advert for amateur actors in Bristol to take part in a staging of Baraka's play *Slave Ship*, a staging that Baraka would be present for. David J got a role, but found the requirements of playing the character of a slave within the play 'traumatic' and was moved into 'the hosting poetical role' (Email). In our interview he describes introducing Amiri Baraka, then waiting in disbelief as Baraka very slowly made his way through the audience to the stage, 'imagine how many verses I could have done by this time!' He describes Baraka 'tapping the bits of wood beside the chairs' as he walks, 'what's the matter with this guy he hasn't reached the microphone yet', then thinking: 'okay let the guy do his thing'. David J stepped to the side. Baraka came on, 'did a poem and kept on doing the knocking'. David J was impressed: 'I've been doing all these special entries, *that* is an entry – nothing to prove'. Baraka didn't talk to him that day, but the next day they were performing again. David J describes his own entrance:

I came on slow, snails would be jealous, I was gliding, I'm taking my time "David will be doing..." You keep talking, I'm getting there, I'm doing an Amiri. I delivered the poem and he was like "yeah, now we can talk, here's my card", and that's when we started talking.

David J describes talking to Baraka about Baraka's theatre work, his staging and use of reality instead of props (for instance handing an actual baby to the journalist in the front row). He describes learning from Baraka 'you have to redesign the environment'. The slow motion entry that he performs at 'OneTaste' redesigns the environment by not following the conventions of a poetry performance, in which the poet's entry is not considered part of their performance. Typically a poet walks onto stage in a 'daily' (if sometimes self-conscious) way, adjusts the microphone, takes a moment, and then transforms into their performing, extra-daily energy. David J starts in the wings; from his first step on stage he has an amplified, extra-daily energy. He redesigns the environment by using the entire stage; he makes the entire stage and every moment of his time on it part of his live writing.

In 1992 David J won the ‘Choice FM Battle Rap Competition’. He started making his name in the early nineties on the hip hop scene in venues including the Borderline Club where he was often ‘on the turn tables speaking for the DJ’. A legendary figure in hip hop, ‘DJ 279’, hosted the ‘Friday night flava show’ at the club, which helped those without a major label to reach an audience and also brought to the UK big names of hip hop such as Dead Prez and Ice-T, whom David J met and freestyled with. Studies of hip hop tend to focus on the American origins and scene; hip hop has become a recognised field within U.S. scholarship, whilst British hip hop and grime music and culture has barely been documented. David Bramwell’s recent study *UK Hip-Hop, Grime and the City: The Aesthetics and Ethics of London’s Rap Scenes* is an exception, as Bramwell confirms: ‘there are currently no other books that examine the production of rap in the United Kingdom and the role that it plays in the formation of young people’s identities’ (1).⁵⁹ Bramwell states that his frustration with existing scholarship on rap is that it has either looked at it ‘solely as a poetic form that could be reduced to a text’ or as ‘a set of social and economic relationships’ that fails to account for ‘the formal qualities of rap as a performed oral genre’ (2). The rich heritages of hip hop and grime (which emerged in East London in the noughties) have influenced many British spoken word artists and poets. Both grime and hip hop have Caribbean heritages and origins with roots in jungle music, calypso, dub poetry, Jamaican sound system and dancehall culture. Bramwell summarises: ‘[London’s] contemporary rap scenes trace their routes through Africa and the Caribbean, as well as the US’ (2).

As well as the influence of hip hop on his work, David J has taken inspiration from many of the artists he has performed alongside. Important milestones of his career include supporting Patti Smith at a book launch *Sur les Traces* in 2006, invited by the war photographer Gigi Gianuzzi. David J also supported the Last Poets in Amsterdam: ‘They were really concerned about the direction of poetry as a form of enlightenment rather than entertainment’. He comments that performing with them made him question his ‘intention’, his ‘origins’, ‘introduction’ and ‘presentation’ (Email).⁶⁰ In our

⁵⁹ Since Bramwell’s book in 2015 a couple of other studies of London’s grime scene have been published – Boakye (2017) and Collins and Rose (2016).

⁶⁰ The Last Poets are often credited as being the founders of hip hop. Influenced by the Beat poets, since the sixties they played with language and features that are now considered integral to hip hop such as Signifyin and testifying (Bradley 181 and eleveld 33).

interview David J talks about meeting the beat poet David Amram in November 2007 when they were performing at The London International Poetry and Song Festival (LIPS) at the (now closed) Marquee Club. Also on the bill were Polarbear, Pete Brown (from Cream), Michael Horovitz, John Hegley and Hunter S. Thompson. The event was programmed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*. David J recounts arriving at the event with Polarbear, and being told David Amram would be accompanying them on piano, which he wasn't keen on: 'we don't need no enhancement'. So David J did a verse and showed off his syncopation and reversed speech, then looked at Amram and started delivering his second poem. Amram started playing. David J realised that he was 'playing the music to my body movement and hand gestures':

Sound 5.1 David J interview [8:34-9:00]



I turned and looked at him and he's going *de ding ding ding ding ding* I'm like 'No! You're playing *ding ding* to my body *ding ding* movement! And he's looking at me as if to say "yes young boy, we've been doing this since the sixties! You're not showing us nothing!"

Amram was improvising by following David J's physicality, as if every movement David J made triggered a sound. He was in effect, playing 'David J'. This experience with Amram showed David J that freestyling by playing the environment is not unique to hip hop. David J's performance style is not only influenced by hip hop but also by the 'wisdom from those elders', from the black avant-garde to jazz and the beat poets.

5.3 "Off the dome": siggin, braggadocio and learning to write live

In *The Singer of Tales* (a study which began in the thirties), Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord researched the ways in which epic poetry is learned and composed, and identified that epic singers from Homer to Slavic heroic singers draw on formula, defined as 'a

group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea' (Lord 30). This influential research has been used to explain how oral literature is composed live through different combinations of memorised phrases. Berliner references the applicability of the Parry-Lord model to jazz improvisation (4). As quoted during the discussion of Salena Godden's improvisation, Berliner's study explores how musicians improvise by drawing from an extensive repertoire of 'ideas, licks, tricks, pet patterns, crips, clichés, and, in the most functional language, things you can do' (102). Like jazz musicians and Slavic heroic singers, freestyling hip hop poets reuse 'pet patterns' and 'clichés', selecting from a repertoire of phrases and vocal techniques.

In his introduction to the 1989 anthology *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, the poet E.A Markham traced dub poetry back to Jamaican DJs, describing them as 'celebrities', and noting the way in which they improvised over instrumental tracks with vocals 'dubbed' out; he describes how they would 'talk, rap, chant, abuse, gossip, sometimes provide witty political and social commentary' (36).

David J learnt to freestyle in London clubs, where the setups had similarities both with earlier Jamaican dub DJs, and with the hip hop culture (also influenced by dub) developing in the United States. David J started 'on the turn tables speaking for the DJ'. He explains 'there'd be a point where the DJ would need... there'd be a break, there'd be a technical fault and they needed that gap filled in'. David J filled those gaps by freestyling set patterns, mimicking voices ('I'd mimic the sounds out there') and riffing on the environment.

David J's explanation of how he learnt to freestyle provides an insight into the ways freestyling poets can call on semantic material, vocal techniques and prosodic features of a variety of performance modes. He trained through battles, practising on his own and with others, and by listening to other hip hop artists. His breathing technique was honed through a misunderstanding of the ways hip hop records are made. He was not aware that artists do 'drop ins' (where the vocals are recorded over several takes to cut out pauses for breath); he assumed artists on tracks were doing circular breathing (a technique in which air is stored in the mouth allowing the performer to speak and inhale simultaneously): 'the guy is rhyming all the way for four minutes without stopping', and so he would put the track on and 'rhyme along with them'. His audible breaths often have equal prominence to his words. He uses breath in various active ways:

sometimes instead of a description, or to illustrate action, sometimes inhaling words, sometimes replacing words with breath. In all of his performances he uses breath as punctuation and as sound effect to convey or enhance potential meanings.

In our interview David J explains that he views technique as necessary in order to escape anything that ‘suppresses your creativity’. Bramwell reflects on the ways young rappers learn their craft:

These interests and concerns are developed through a variety of processes, including copying rappers on the radio, writing lyrics in the bedroom, clashing with other rappers in a circle at school, and practicing what one artist described as the ‘lost art’ of freestyling. (5)

In our interview David J describes learning to freestyle, spending many hours practising ‘voice patterns, listening to things, watching television with the sound down and applying your own narrative to it’. He remembers: ‘when I was little I used to hide behind the speaker’ while the DJ was on the turntables, and he’d ‘mimic the sounds’. He picked up new techniques by learning from his ‘opponents’ in rap battles. However, he struggled to practise at home, too many ‘interruptions’: *“Who’s he talking to now? He’s not even on the phone! Who are you talking to in there?”* “Nah I’m practising” *“practising for what?!”* David J needed to write in the air, and develop his craft out loud. He picked up vocabulary from books in the family home, medical journals and the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and integrated it into his freestyling: ‘everything that I capture within my aperture is delivered to the receptor cells of your retinas retina retina’ (‘OneTaste’ [4:50]). He describes weaving medical vocabulary into his battling:

we can have fun ’cause my family is medical so we’re gonnna do vocal autopsies so everyone is... *‘ah! nah he’s gonna rip em apart...’* nah I’m gonna do it clinically, ’cause mum’s a health visitor.

David J explains that when freestyling ‘it’s your life really that gets played out’. He describes hiding in a corner: ‘a silent child hears more’. He would listen to family members and pick up their vocabulary and voices, (he demonstrates in a Jamaican accent): *“I don’t know why he went to! He’s always gambling and!”* The results of hiding behind the speaker and listening to the DJ’s sounds, and of hiding behind the

sofa listening to his family can be heard in his performances. Many of his vocal effects mimic the sounds a DJ can produce on the decks, such as the sound of rewinding vinyl manually by spinning the record back. It's a classic technique that, as Laurent Fintoni records in his blog essay on the 'History of the Rewind', can be traced back to Jamaican sound system culture of the sixties:

Some rewinds are smooth, the record stopping by use of the turntable's start/stop button, while others are a little rougher, the needle hurtling across the vinyl's grooves as a hand frantically spins the record back.

David J's rewinds tend to be rough; he draws out the sound of reversed or rewound speech. This can be heard just before minute two in his performance of 'This is What We Do'. David J spent hours practising these techniques in order to appear to not be trying: 'you don't want to be seen training as an amateur you want to come out with these armour'. We can see this 'armour' in full display in his 'OneTaste' performance, which is essentially one long boast, described in hip hop as 'braggadocio'; in which he talks (boasts/brags) about the development of his style from the eighties until 2010.

David J's 'OneTaste' braggadocio often references sex and virility:

I should have been born, I should have been born, I should have been born, I'm
[Inhaled Word] *fuckin*g the words so fast I should have been born with speedbumps
on my [Inhaled Words] *dick dick dick* [2:05]⁶¹

In a documentary about misogyny and masculinity within hip hop, William Jelani Cobb, comments:

The reason why braggadocio and boast is so central to the history of hip-hop is because you're dealing with the history of black men in America. There's a whole lineage of black men wanting to deny their own fragility and so in some ways, you have to do that, like a psychic armor to walk out into the world everyday. But the other side of it is this running inside joke that everyone knows, you know, that is not

⁶¹ My descriptions of David J's vocal techniques are in square brackets and I am reproducing the text without line breaks (because there are no page versions available therefore I do not know where David J would insert the line break, and as his work is entirely oral, the concept of line breaks and form on the page is irrelevant).

the case. (Hurt)

David J's dick and sex jokes are part, as Cobb says, 'inside jokes'; they are ironic references to hip hop's lineage and form rather than sincere assertions of his lyrical virility. However, as he says in our interview, he is not able to show any kind of weakness in performance, 'I don't want to embarrass myself and my family name'. As Cobb suggests, showing any kind of weakness is not an option; David J's vocal techniques are part of his 'armour' and are occasionally deployed as a form of defence, to mask slips in his delivery, hiding any vulnerability. For instance, in 'This is What We Do' he appears to slip when he says 'incorrect now' instead of 'incorrect knowledge'. He makes this a feature of his performance rather than revealing it as a slip by using his reverse speech technique twice on the line before completing it [5:10].

In the previous chapter I discussed musical and gestural forms of Signifyin in relation to Salena Godden's use of quotation and gestural tropes. Signifyin is a classic hip hop technique, involving the kind of quotation described in the previous chapter (in hip hop terms described as 'sampling') and in the more standard use of the term to describe an inventive approach to speaking about, or 'siggin on' another person. Geneva Smitherman defines this mode of Signifyin:

Signification, our second mode of discourse, refers to the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles – that is, signifies on – the listener. Sometimes signifyin (also siggin) is done to make a point, sometimes it's just for fun. [...] It is a culturally approved method of talking about somebody – usually through verbal indirection. (118-119)

As Smitherman describes, Signification often contains humour, puns, wordplay, surprising punchlines, and is 'metaphorical-imagistic (but images rooted in the everyday, real world)' (121).⁶² Humour, surprise and metaphor can be heard in the following:

⁶² 'The Dozens' is a form of signification, and is also sometimes played in hip hop battles. 'Siggin' is when the speaker Signifies on someone who is present; the Dozens has 'some rules and rituals of its own, thus it constitutes a kind of subcategory within the signification mode'. The main difference is that when playing the Dozens the person sigs on someone's family (classically 'yo mama') rather than the person themselves. (Smitherman 128)

I surgically remove the spine *out of your back back back* so you can [Inhaled Word] *hump* yourself properly. ('OneTaste' [5:33])⁶³

In our interview David J stresses that he learnt his craft during pre-internet days: 'it was not about going online and posting and bombarding people with where you were going to be or what you've done or accolades'. As he explains: 'you might be playing pat ball or table...and they come "*what you got man?*" and a crowd forms, no fight or anything'. This is a very different scene to the poetry communities where 'respect' is often related to whether or not a poet 'goes viral' on Youtube, and the performances that most aspire to are programmed (and paid for) by organisations such as Apples and Snakes rather than in the open air. Bramwell compares the rap battle (or cipher), in which a group forms around battling MCs to the ritual and song circles that enslaved people performed as part of plantation life:

The appropriation of the ring shout in London may meet very different needs to those expressed in the slaves' song and dance, but the adaptation of the slave circle into ciphers and clashes by young Londoners suggests that it remains an important social practice through which they craft their adult identities. (8)

David J's 'OneTaste' performance is not a battle but a slick event in a theatre with a large audience and stage lighting. Without an opponent, David J's 'siggin' becomes abstract demonstrations of clever word play and linguistic dexterity, and loses some of the humour and the social interaction it would have when addressed to another rapper, as well as the tension and energy of a verbal battle. When the language of the battle is taken off the street and put onto stage, the practice is removed from the community and the establishing of social roles and identities, instead the emphasis is placed on the individual and their performance of a pre-crafted and rehearsed persona. David J's performances often demonstrate freestyling and the delivery of rehearsed material. When I saw him perform at the ICA, his prepared soundscape did not play as planned, and he responded by walking into the audience and freestyling. Bramwell identifies that freestyling, or composing 'from the top of the head' (16) was identified by the rappers Rain and Possessed as: 'the most creative part of hip hop,' a 'lost art,' and the 'rawest

⁶³ Using the terminology listed in the taxonomy, this passage would be notated: "I surgically [PS: LOW] remove the spine [IW] *out of your back* [IW: ECHO] *back back* so you can [IW] *hump* yourself properly" [5:33]

form' of rapping. This is especially the case when a rapper refers to something spatially present in order to draw attention to the fact that he is freestyling [...] The originality of capturing a moment in this form involves the inventive use of free language and the privileging of the present. (16) This art of referencing things that are present in the space is a literal form of live writing, in which the content and the delivery mode of the poetry is composed in the moment of performance. David J describes how he learnt to incorporate things that are 'spatially present' into his freestyle:

Sound 5.2 David J interview [17:56]



what you actually do you use your eyes as a pen so whatever you see goes on your imaginary form so as you look you see Hannah, you look around you see: speaker...so you both:[hæ(*exhaled*)]; [h ↓(*inhaled*)]: you see the two combine and then you see microphone and then you see headphone [<inhales>]; [z], everything kind of light...bright ... and then you start 'light, bright, melanin...' Then you add what's in your head already, current effects, anything that's going on and then you pause ...and you go in again but also you reveal what's inside of you...your thought...⁶⁴

In this example David J demonstrates how he uses his 'eye like a pen' by 'live writing' in our interview. Of course we could describe all speech as live writing. Speech usually is improvised, but it occurs in fragments. Daily speech is usually transactional and does not have the kind of 'flow' needed for performance. David J's explanation reveals how he 'writes' in response to his environment, using not only the objects in the space around him (me, the speaker, the microphone), but also extra-daily vocal techniques. David J's use of breath is not the standard kind of inhalation and exhalation necessary in

⁶⁴ As an exercise in transcription I have indicated his distinctive extra-daily uses of voice with a mix of descriptive words such as 'exhaled' and phonetic notation to indicate how he is playing with the sounds of the words, but include the audio clip to clarify. The arrow indicates 'ingressive', meaning air that flows inwards, and indicates that David J makes the sound on an inhalation.

order to speak; he makes a feature out of the sound of the breath itself. In his performances he uses the noise of breath as a sound effect, and often inhales or exhales unvoiced words. In our interview, instead of simply vocalising my name, David J transforms it into breath sounds, or, technically, a ‘voiceless pulmonic ingressive’ ([h↓ (*inhaled*)]).

David J’s extensive toolkit of vocal effects are always at his tongue-tip. An instrumentalist who knows their instrument and its capabilities does not need to think about breath control or how to achieve certain sounds when playing, and instead they can focus on reading or improvising the music. David J has mastered his technical capabilities as a vocalist and can focus on the language and content when he freestyles. In our interview he goes on to describe the kind of training he had to go through in order to ‘dispel the first thought’ when freestyling [19:48-21:39]. He honed this ability by working with another rapper, ‘Powerpack’:

You’d sit on a table and place an object on a table [...] You never know what the object is, he [Powerpack] places a cotton bud and he goes:

‘Just talk about that cotton bud.’

‘Okay the cotton bud solves and so on... to the thud’

‘No no no “thud, thud” you focus *on* the cotton bud, it’s blue, it’s got the two tips, you do a story about the cotton bud focus *only* on the, don’t drift off... No man!’

And then he’d ask what you don’t know about: murder, I know about; football, okay I don’t know about football. ‘This is a football.’ Then he’d set up scenarios and you’d have to work your way out of it, so it’s mental mind games you develop. By the time six hours is gone you spoke about everything and hopefully you’ve got someone there to maintain your sanity and then you’d be out on the street, you’d be at a bus stop and you’d be walking and you’d see somebody and you’d be like:

‘You see that crippled man? Walking. Suddenly talking. Grey inside the hair molecular structure is there left and right hemis...’

...and then you’d be like no, what voice would he have? And you’d throw a voice onto him and then we would be talking about what he’s thinking... [in a breathy ‘old

man' voice]:

'Oh I don't know why I married that woman I'm not too sure oh she's coming oh she's going to phone me...'

...and we'd put all that in all these different ...and by the end of it you're there, you've got your own walking audio book.

Although freestyling rappers, David J included, often use set phrases and techniques, this explanation of his training reveals the ways in which David J has trained himself to 'dispel the first thought', avoid clichéd rhyme and set phrases, and instead use language to describe what he sees (for instance the detail in the gait and appearance of the old man) and use what he sees to create original stories and characters (for instance the old man's distinctive voice and marital problems). We are familiar with the slightly clichéd trope of the writer who sits outside a café people watching, jotting down notes and imagining what is going on in the lives of the people they observe. This is the out loud version. Rather than jotting down notes in a moleskin notebook, David J writes out loud. He literally engages in 'live writing', writing with his environment, imagination, modes of delivery, voices and modes of speech alongside virtuosic vocal techniques.

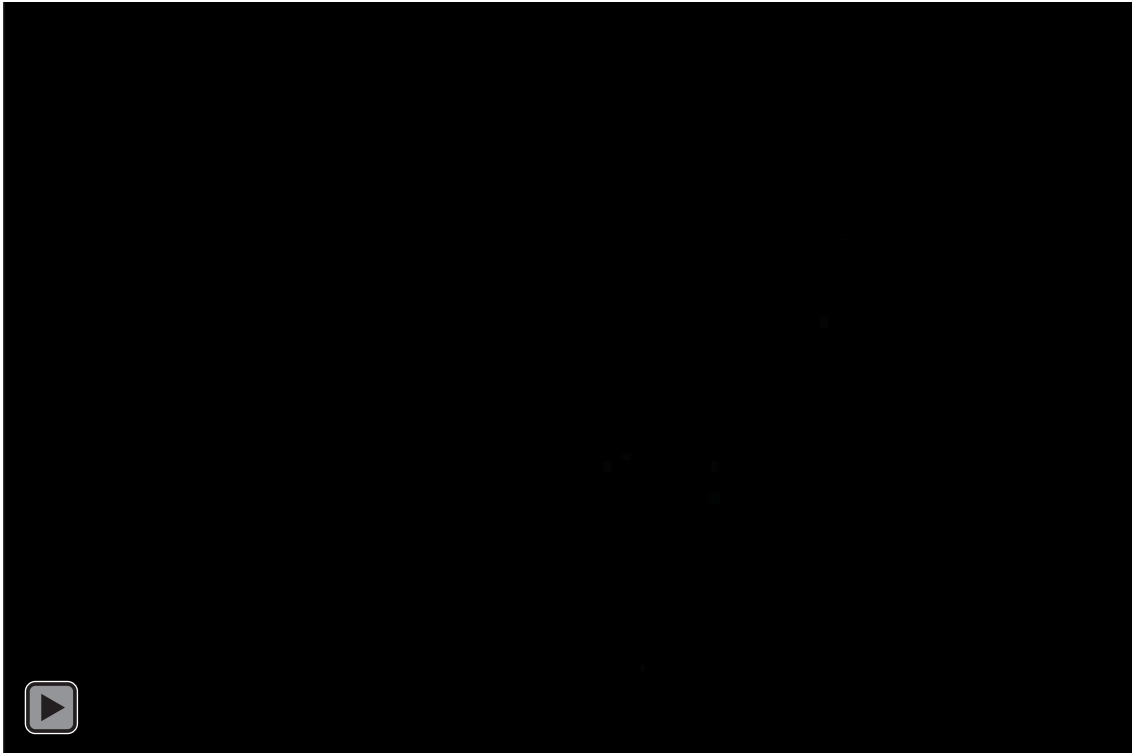
In contrast to the examples discussed in "British Spoken Word Voice", David J's shifts between voices, registers and tones are unpredictable. He uses many of the aspects of tonal semantics identified by Geneva Smitherman, with roots in African languages: 'talk-singing, repetition and alliterative word play, intonational contouring, rhyme' (137). David J acoustically produces vocal effects that are usually achieved through manipulating the voice using sound editing software and the manual techniques of vinyl DJs including sampling, reverse, fast forward and rewind, tempo shifts, pitch transposition, cuts and splices, and effects such as reverb, echo and tremolo. David J achieves all this with just his voice and a microphone. Looking at David J's work over a number of performances it becomes apparent that he has a repertoire of techniques that he draws from. There is no existing way of notating or even describing all of these techniques. They are comparable to 'extended vocal techniques' used by composers such as Luciano Berio, who provides singers with a key explaining the notation. As we are working from videos, the easiest way of identifying the various techniques David J uses is through annotating the video itself. Some aspects of his performance, such as his

use of gesture and pauses, can be described in standard language, other techniques require a more codified vocabulary.

The table below focuses on his vocal techniques and includes a list of terms and their shorthand, along with descriptions of the technique and examples. For the purposes of this taxonomy I have referenced three performances, all of which are available on Youtube: 'Confessions of a Brothel Camera' (2012), 'OneTaste' (2010), and 'This is What We Do' (2009).

'Confessions of a Brothel Camera' is a great example of David J's use of the conversational mode within his performances and various kinds of mimic; the narrative is told from the point of view of a camera. The 'OneTaste' performance is referenced in the taxonomy as it contains many examples of effects such as echo and inhaled words. The whole 'OneTaste' performance (or at least the material made available on Youtube) is 'braggadocio', and is delivered mainly in a fast mode that I am describing as 'flow', so although it is a great example of David J's vocal effects, signification, braggadocio, and the way he can 'come out as a grand master' it offers less opportunity to discuss use of narrative and other delivery modes. 'This is what we do' is my main case study as it demonstrates the way David J cuts between narratives and delivery modes and writes live with vocal techniques alongside semantic material.

Audio Visual 5.1 David J ‘This is What We Do’ annotated by the author



5.4 The Pugilist’s Voices: A Taxonomy of David J’s acoustic vocal techniques

Figure 16. A Taxonomy of David J’s acoustic vocal techniques

A taxonomy of David J’s acoustic vocal techniques		
Descriptor	Description	Example
<p>BREATH SOUND EFFECT [BREATH S.E] ALSO: BLOW [BLOW]</p>	<p>Breath as sound effect, where combinations of vocal effects are used together.</p> <p>‘BLOW’ sound is made by blowing air onto the microphone and is used as a sound effect.</p> <p>(Also see INHALATION/EXHALATION [I] / [E]; INHALED WORDS [IW]; and REVERSED EXHALATION [REV.E])</p>	<p>“...my style is heavy like [BREATH S.E: I-E-I-E] Darth Vader’s breathing after he’s finished banging his missus to be specific...” (‘OneTaste’ [2:24])</p> <p><i>Extensive use of breath and vocal sound as sound effect can be heard in ‘Confessions of a Brothel Camera’ including IW; I; E; REV.E; BLOW [4:47-5:00]</i></p>
<p>CLICKS [l]</p>	<p>Alveolar lateral clicks – David J uses this click sound as a sound effect, often alongside breath. The symbol is that used in the international phonetic alphabet.</p>	<p>“Took out my revolver [l][l]” (‘This is What We Do’ [5:00])</p> <p>“[l][l],[l][l]... and I always say, I don’t know footsteps, so it does sound like a horse coming up” (‘Confessions of a Brothel Camera’ [5:51-6:04])</p>
<p>CLOSE [CL]</p>	<p>Inner voice (low register, soft). In radio drama the term ‘CLOSE’ is used to indicate that the actor should be literally ‘close’ to the microphone, this position is used to convey the character’s thoughts, described as ‘the voice in your head’.</p>	<p>“[CL] And we can see that R.I.P does not mean Rest In ...Peace, R.I.P actually means rest, in...” (This is What We Do [2:42-2:55])</p>

<p>CONVERSATIONAL [CONVO]</p>	<p>This is the ‘talking to audience’ voice, it is used when simply ‘talking to the audience’ between poems in an informal way, but is also used with poems, for example David J uses this mode extensively in his performance of ‘Confessions of a brothel camera’. This mode often goes into character imitation (MIMIC), using different accents and vocal qualities.</p>	<p>[CONVO] “You have to put that in, coz Mum was like...” (‘Confessions of a Brothel camera’ [3:17])</p> <p>“[CONVO] And I always say, I don’t know footsteps, so it does sound like a horse coming up ... so people say: ‘You don’t sound’ Look, nobody’s perfect man you just gotta work a ting you understand...” (Ibid. [5:51-6:04])</p>
<p>DYNAMIC SHIFTS [DS] SOFT; LOUD; SHOUT etc. e.g [DS: SOFT-LOUD]</p>	<p>A dynamic shift often accompanies a mode shift as modes are partly defined by their dynamic, however, it is also possible to shift dynamic without shifting mode, which is when I use [DS] in my annotation. In this example [LOUD] is also [HIGH], and [SOFT] is also [LOW]. The example demonstrates that he shifts dynamic between syllables of multi-syllabic words.</p>	<p>“So you can [DS: MID-LOUD] caress [DS: SOFT] bless [DS: LOUD] puga [DS: SOFT] listical, [DS: LOUD] un [DS: SOFT] touchable [DS: LOUD] di [DS: SOFT] abolical” (‘OneTaste’ [4:38])</p>
<p>ECHO [ECHO]</p>	<p>A distinctive feature that can be heard in many of his performances – David J also describes it as the ‘echo style’.</p> <p>The echo effect can be described as ‘word play’ (one of the features of tonal semantics listed by Geneva Smitherman). In the first example (‘OneTaste’) the echo does not function solely in the way in which a vocal effect added through technology would, but is more sophisticated, playing with the meanings of the word ‘done/undone/don’.</p>	<p>“...and understand no one’s ever done what I’ve done [ECHO] done what I’ve done done what I’ve done undone what I’ve done [ECHO] done done done done done what I’ve done I’m the don in South London, West London ...” (‘OneTaste’ [2:46])</p> <p>“[ECHO] tongue tongue tongue tongue tongue tongue.... (Ibid. [3:02])</p> <p>“Whether I’m dead or alive”, [ECHO] d d d d d d d d d d d d...” (Ibid. [5:08])</p>

FLOW [FLOW]	<p>'Flow' is generally used in hip hop simply to describe someone's delivery, for instance you might say 'each performer has their own flow'... I am using it here to denote a particular fast hip hop style delivery that David J uses as just one of his performance modes.</p> <p>[FLOW] is usually delivered in a high register and at a fast tempo.</p>	<p><i>Although he usually uses it as just one of many delivery modes, he delivers most of his 'OneTaste' performance in FLOW, [1:00-1:27].</i></p> <p>"[FLOW] A lot of people don't even know what to do with the lyrical because their performance is weak like a man with one testicle" ('This is What We Do' [0:28])</p>
GRAIN [GRAIN]	<p>I use the descriptor 'grain' in the same way I used it when discussing Salena Godden's grainy vocal quality. A repurposing of Roland Barthes' term from his seminal essay 'The Grain of the Voice'; my use is more literal than Barthes' musings on the phenomenology of the voice; I use [GRAIN] to indicate those moments when the gravel and phlegm of the throat can be heard in the voice, what Barthes describes as 'the materiality of the body' ('The Grain of the Voice' 182).</p>	<p>"...the bomb chemical compound [GRAIN] nicknamed the mother of Satan..." ('This is What We Do' [01:52])</p>
<p>INHALATION/ EXHALATION [I] / [E]</p>	<p>David J uses INHALATIONS and EXHALATIONS as a kind of oral punctuation within long FLOW passages. His use of breath always seems conscious, even when simply exhaling at the end of a performance, for instance at the end of 'This is What We Do' [3:43].</p>	<p>"... for those that have lost theirs.... [E]" ('This is What We Do' [3:43])</p> <p>"[I] Gun barrels full of bullets" (Ibid. [5:18])</p>
<p>INHALED WORDS [IW] And [IW: ECHO]</p>	<p>Speech that is pronounced on an inhalation, usually unvoiced, often repeated to give an ECHO effect.</p>	<p>" [IW ECHO]...pugilist pugilist pugilist pugilist" ('One Taste' [2:06]); "[IW: ECHO] dick dick dick dick dick dick dick..." (Ibid. [2:15])</p> <p>"performance is weak like a man with one [IW: ECHO] testicle testicle testicle testicle"</p>

		testicle testicle testicle...” (Ibid. [4:41])
KISS [⓪] [⓪] is a phonetic symbol that indicates the sound of a kiss.	David J likes to greet the microphone, ‘I call it “Michelle”’, with a kiss: ‘I always kiss the metal that’s our connection’ (interview).	“Enjoy every moment of your life while you’re here and keep breathing for those ... [⓪]” (‘OneTaste’ [10:47])
MIC TECHNIQUE [MIC T]	Microphone technique (changing the distance and/or position of the speaker in relation to the microphone) changes the quality of voice, it can simply change from amplified to unamplified by speaking into and then away from the microphone. It can also give the sense that sound is panning between speakers, as in the example.	“[MIC T] above me below me behind me right by me” (‘This is What We Do’[2:24])
MIMIC e.g [M: SCI-FI] [M:MUM]	Putting on various accents and voices, mimicking other people, such as his mother (nasal, with a Jamaican accent), or a ‘sci-fi’ voice, or any other voices.	“[M:SCI-FI] We’re living in a time when the world is destroying itself...” (‘This is What We Do’ [0:41]) “...[M: MUM] they’ll investigate the family bringing shame on the family name, shame on the family name, just do your flow, let them know...”(Ibid. [3:30])
MODE OF DELIVERY SHIFT [MS]	Sudden shifts between modes of delivery. (Often coincides with dynamic and pitch shifts.) Each mode has a particular tempo, pitch, dynamic and vocal quality.	We are living in a multi-di- [MS: PROC-CONVO]: come on David, continue, I will” (‘This is What We Do’ [1:31-1:33])
MOUTHS [MOUTHS]	Occasionally David J uses a pause or silence in place of a word, when the audience knows what those words are as they have heard the line before. This is evident in the final moment from ‘This is What We Do’ when we know the	“enjoy every moment of your life while you’re here and keep breathing for those [MOUTHS]: <i>that have lost theirs</i>] One Love. ” (‘Confessions of a Brothel

	concluding words are ‘breathing for those who have lost theirs’ (because we’ve already heard the line earlier in the performance). He does the same thing in the second example, ‘Confessions of a Brothel Camera’, (using the same line) however, in this example he mouths the missing words.	Camera’ [10:45]
PITCH SHIFT [PS]	Sometimes coincides with shifts between modes of delivery. As in the example, David J often shifts from a high or mid register to a sudden low register.	“[FLOW] A lot of people don’t even know what to do with the lyrical because their performance is weak like a man with one [PS: HIGH-LOW] testicle” (‘This is What We Do’ [0:28])
PROCLAIMING [PROC]	Higher register, loud, ‘declamatory’, the voice is projected and often at a sustained pitch. This register might compared to the one Kate Tempest (and the majority of ‘spoken word poets’) perform in. The voice is projected and at a high, often sustained pitch.	“[PROC] I wanna bless you... with a style...” (This is What We Do’ [0:07])
REVERSED [REVERSE]	David J mimics the sound of reversed speech rather than technically reversing the sound, it is what he described in our interview as ‘dancing backwards’.	“While I was approaching upper Woburn Place [REVERSE] ...” (‘This is What We Do’ [1:58])
REVERSED EXHALATION [REV.E]	A ‘reversed exhalation’ is an inhalation, however, I’m using this term to describe a particular kind of inhalation, which mimics the sound of an exhalation that has been electronically reversed. He also uses proximity to the microphone to accentuate the sound.	“...and then he falls on the floor [REV.E] curls up into a ball [REV.E] and then [he] changes [REV.E] changes [REV.E] changes [REV.E] changes [BLOW]...” (‘Confessions of a Brothel Camera’ [5:36-5:46])
STORY-TELLING [S.T]	The kind of voice we use when telling stories, a narrative, paced conversational mode of delivery with non-stylised intonation that often coincides with ‘CLOSE’ – proximity to the microphone. I use [S.T] where both the mode of delivery and the content suggest ‘story-	“ [S.T] [CLOSE] In Kings Cross there was an individual who used to come to the poetry events. He parks his car, he went on one of the trains at Kings Cross” (‘This is What We Do’ [2:56])

	<p>telling' .</p> <p>The second example shows a shift midway through the line from [S.T] to [CL]. Although the tone of voice is the same, indicating the shift between modes illustrates how David J uses the modes slightly differently.</p>	<p>“RIP does not mean [MS: S.T-CL] so many people die in senseless wars”. (Ibid. [3:10])</p>
<p>TEMPO SHIFT [TS]</p>	<p>Tempo shifts often correspond with mode shifts, as modes often have particular tempos e.g. ‘FLOW’ is always fast and ‘CLOSE’ tends to be at a slower pace, however, it is also possible to shift tempo without shifting mode.</p>	<p>“Nineteen ninety eight... [TS: SLOW-FAST] I’m toe-tagging a body bag and I’m packing them in a coffin, no one comes close or you feel like an orphan you feel the force of my lyrical gale force wind blows the flesh right up your skeleton I’ll leave you holding your head in your hands like a Shakespearian thespian like you telling them nobody seen nothing like this before just like what the pimp said to the nun [...] this lyrical live by the show voting is higher than a ... [TS: FAST-SLOW] Nineteen eighty” (‘OneTaste’ [1:02- 1:42])</p>
<p>WHISPER [WHISPER]</p>	<p>This example may be a mix of inhaled words [IW] and [WHISPER] (on the exhalation). I have used italics to clarify which words are whispered.</p>	<p>“and it’s a blessing that everybody’s here to hear the [WHISPER] <i>truth</i> delivered through the [WHISPER] <i>microphone</i> into your [WHISPER] <i>frontal lobe</i> and your ear [WHISPER] <i>lobe</i>” (‘This is What We Do’ [3:17])</p>

5.5 The surface of language and Postcoloniality

As Joey Kreiman and Diana Sidtis point out in their study *Foundations of Voice Studies*, ‘the emotional tone of an utterance has a direct impact on the manner in which a listener processes spoken words’ (304). During the conversations we have in daily life we interpret not only what is said but *how* it is said. Tone impacts our interpretation of meaning. Tone and content are usually linked, for instance loving words are often said with a loving tone. However, when loving words are said in a cold tone we might interpret sarcasm, passive aggression or coldness rather than love (or any number of other things, depending on the context). Our interpretation of tone helps us to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate. This also applies to poetry performances.

Many of David J’s vocal techniques are unfamiliar and do not communicate any specific emotion or meaning. For instance, although we might interpret a suddenly loud dynamic as angry or passionate depending on the context, we have no daily experience of reversed or repeated words or many of the other techniques David J uses. These techniques do not seem to have a direct or automatic connection with the semantic content of his poems. Unlike the distinctive features of spoken word voice, which are used so consistently they become ‘automatized’, David J varies his delivery mode and therefore his vocal techniques achieve ‘maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication into the background’, and instead foregrounding ‘the act of expression, the act of speech itself (Mukařovský 45). When David J delivers lines in non-standard ways (both in terms of daily life and in terms of established modes of poetry performance), for instance, when he speaks on an inhalation, repeats words as if he has an echo, and switches pitch drastically mid-line, he makes us aware of the materiality of the word itself.

The avant-garde poet and critic Tony Lopez puts forward a notion of the ‘surface of the poem’s language’ in his book, *Meaning Performance* (3). Although Lopez is focusing on ‘innovative poetry in English’, or ‘avant-garde’ poetry and poetics (as discussed in chapter one), his descriptions of the ‘surface’ of language are applicable to this discussion of David J’s vocal techniques. Lopez explains that a key characteristic of innovative poetry is to ‘focus our attention as readers onto language itself, rather than

focusing on experience, as if language were merely a transparent medium' (112). Lopez's discussion of the 'surface' of language is applicable to performance as much, or perhaps even more, than the page. Lopez writes that when poets use language in innovative ways we are 'kept on the surface of the poem, looking at language and thinking about language and potential meaning' (Ibid).

When David J inhales words, uses repetition and breath and stylised sounds he makes us aware of the 'surface' of language. In David J's case, the noise that he makes is undistinguishable from the meaning; the noise is so distinctive that it *is* the meaning. His extensive range of delivery modes and vocal techniques are so unusual and unpredictable that it often feels like he is composing with the sounds of words as much, or perhaps more so, than with their meanings. This could lead to a conclusion that David J is a sound poet, in the same avant-garde tradition as Bob Cobbing and Jaap Blonk. However, as well as having different influences and heritages, perhaps the difference is that sound poets use sounds to build non-linguistic meanings, and often have no actual words in their performances at all, whereas David J uses linguistic material to build sounds. Sound poets compose with sounds as if they are words; David J pulls sounds *from* words. Both bring our attention to the 'surface' of language. While 'surface' might be seen as a kind of 'skin', the language used by Caroline Bergvall, Charles Bernstein and Roland Barthes is far more fleshy. As described in the first chapter, Bergvall describes 'the materiality of writing' (3), Bernstein refers to 'language's flesh' and 'animalady' (21-22). Barthes' hypothetical notion of 'writing aloud', the concept he explores in *The Pleasure of the Text* 'as though it existed' (66) is a rhapsody on 'language lined with flesh' which bears quoting again:

a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language [...] it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss. (66-67)

David J's vocal techniques could distract us from semantic meaning by drawing attention to technical artistry and the 'surface' or skin of language and language production. Or, we could experience his techniques as dancing with the materiality of language, getting under the surface/skin to language's flesh, communicating on a more visceral, fleshy level.

Although he does not use creole, David J's playful approach to language and creation of his own vocabulary of vocal effects can be compared to the wordplay and focus on sound and rhythms of nation language discussed in earlier chapters. The Canadian Caribbean poet M. NourbeSe Philip writes that 'language as we know it has to be dislocated and acted upon – even destroyed – so that it begins to serve our purposes' (85). She says it is not sufficient to write in 'standard English' because it is a language that 'that was used to brutalize and diminish Africans so that they would come to a profound belief in their own lack of humanity' (84, 85). Her subversion of language aims to reveal it 'as the tainted tongue it truly is' (Ibid.). Like David J, Philip cuts up words and plays with sounds:

touch me
with the tongue of your
lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
english
is a foreign anguish (32)

Philip echoes the 'lan' of language and slips between the sounds of 'language', 'anguish' and 'english' in similar ways to David J's use of echo and sound/word play. In our interview, David J did not discuss any political reasons for his slicing, dicing and dislocation of English, however, his manipulation of narratives and mode of splicing between narratives subverts standard approaches to news reporting and political commentary, questioning, reversing, re-winding and cutting up the language of reportage, story-telling and hip hop braggadocio. In effect both David J and Philip 'Signify' on the signification of narrative modes and the signification of language itself. Gates expands on the relationship between signification and Signification, explaining that it is 'the redirection of attention from semantic to the rhetorical': 'This redirection toward sound, without regard for the scrambling of sense that it entails, defines what is meant by the materiality of the signifier, its thingness' (64). Barthes' notion of a granulating, crackling text is a hypothetical concept. David J's extra-daily performance techniques, his 'scrambling of sense' could be an embodiment of a kind of 'writing

aloud' with the 'flesh' of language that Barthes could only conceptualise.

Frank E. Manning (in his ethnographic study of black clubs in Bermuda conducted in 1969-72) comments that Signifyin is used by men in clubs 'not to convey information but either to exhibit his personality and style or to persuade someone else to act in ways that will serve his interests' (62). He observes that 'talk is not meant to be listened to for its content but appreciated for its style, humor, and rhythm' (63). We can observe this in David J's work; his vocal play, style and rhythm are foregrounded over the content. This extreme vocal virtuosity can be considered from a postcolonial, political context. Theorist of creole and creolization, Edouard Glissant writes that for 'Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse' (123). He explains that enslaved people would camouflage 'the word under the provocative intensity of the scream' so that its meaning could not be understood by the white colonialists: 'the dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise'. He writes that in order to make creole appear as 'a blast of sound' it was sped up into 'one impenetrable block of sound' (124).

David J's use of speed, reversed language, splintered and fractured sound and sentences can be seen to function as 'a specialized system of significant insignificance' (Ibid.). His vocal techniques are harnessed in order to make an impact beyond the semantic meaning of the words and phrases. David J's use of sound sonically weaponises his performances, so that he can engage in verbal battles, and 'gain prestige' (interview). The noise is essential; the narrative lines of his poems are effectively camouflaged by 'meaningless texture' and blasts of sound. The verbal craft of David J's performances does not translate onto the page. His blasts of sound are designed to have a live impact on his audiences and his battle partners. They act in space and time, out loud; his vocal technique is integral to his writing. We might say the intensity and virtuosity of his delivery camouflages his words, and makes it impossible to publish on the page, thus removing it from the (predominantly white) critical context of poetry publishing. We need to consider the virtuosity of David J's vocal acrobatics as much as, or more than the content. The style *is* the content.

5.6 Close Listening: 'This is What We Do'

'This is What We do' contains many of the vocal effects listed in the taxonomy, nods at

the classic hip hop tropes found in the 'OneTaste' performance, and knits several narrative lines and delivery modes together. I have annotated the recording to clarify the ways sounds and terms correlate; it can be referred to alongside this discussion. The annotated recording reveals the range and sheer quantity of vocal effects that David J writes with, and how these vocal effects are as important to his performances as the actual 'words'. Of course, when listening to David J's performances we do not separate the 'words' from their sounds; this is an artificial separation that occurs in the transcription.

The recording of 'This is What We Do' available on Youtube is structured in two parts. It could be seen as two separate poems; however, the two parts begin and end in the same way, and use similar content, therefore I view it as one performance with a main section lasting three minutes forty seconds, followed by a thirty second linking (or 'bridge') section (in which David J drops out of 'performance mode' and talks to the audience informally [CONVO], then concludes with a 'coda' lasting one minute forty seconds. I annotate the recording using the terminology listed above. Modes of delivery such as [CL], [S.T] and [MIMIC: SCI-FI] are similar to each other and another listener might identify them differently; [PROC] and [FLOW] have similarities to the 'spoken word voice' discussed in the previous chapter. In my annotated video [PROC] is differentiated from [FLOW] as it has a slightly slower tempo, a higher and more sustained pitch, and louder, more 'projected' voice. It is comparable to the high-stylised intonation of Kate Tempest.

'This is What We Do' references the London bombings of July 2005, and many of David J's poems talk about violence and loss of life. In this way his work is in a similar tradition to dub poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, who wrote about police brutality and racism, using his poetry as a political vehicle. Johnson stated in an interview: 'From the very beginning I saw myself as giving voice to, and documenting, the experiences of my generation' (Caesar 64). Most political poets, from the dub poets to the ranting poets, Liverpool poets to punk poets, take one subject per poem. David J takes a different approach, cutting between narrative lines and interrupting or playing with meanings through vocal techniques. These techniques have similarities with the cut-up techniques found in avant-garde writing, such as the work of William Burroughs and Kathy Acker. In her essay on cut-up writing techniques, 'Dead Doll Humility', Acker talks about her love of playing with language and discovering that 'language was

material like clay or paint'. Aligning with the poststructural mistrust of authorial presence discussed in chapter one, Acker rejects the notion of a single authoritative 'voice' of the writer. Instead, she wanted to write by 'using anyone's voice, anyone's text, whatever material she wanted to use' (Ibid.).

'Cut up' describes the page-based writing technique favoured by the avant-garde, 'collage' is the term used in fine art, and 'sampling' is the term used to describe the equivalent technique in music production. David J's disruption to linearity is created through his delivery. He does not only cut between narratives, but also uses sudden cuts between modes of voice, pitch and speed. David J's cuts are acoustic examples of the cutting and pasting that can be achieved when editing sound files, have similarities to scratching and mixing vinyl, and also connect to a hip hop music technique of 'sampling'. David J's practice of picking up phraseology from textbooks and other sources and integrating them into his performances, and riffing off his surroundings could be described as live cut up, or as an acoustic vocal form of 'live sampling'.

The phrase 'live sampling' connects David J's techniques with those of DJs who live sample tracks, mixing between records or sampling live using music programmes. This sense of the composer being somewhat separate from their material, either looking down at records on the turntables, or at a computer screen, provides a literal perspective of the 'surface' of language. They scratch and mix the surface of a record, or compose by cutting, pasting and looping tracks viewed on the surface of a screen. David J's focus on cutting between modes of delivery and narrative lines give the sense that he is separated from his content and material enough to be able to jump between modes and techniques, live writing with the 'surface' of his language. David J's form of acoustic live sampling disrupts narrative, the 'lyric I' and a stable identity in similar ways to that achieved with avant-garde writing techniques such as cut-up. Writing on hip hop and the politics of postmodernism, Russell A. Potter aligns these discourses, commenting that 'the hip-hop practice of "sampling" pre-recorded sounds constitutes its founding gesture: an incursion against the author-function' (36). Disruption of a form of authority or authorship within hip hop is a move against capitalism and consumption, a way of resisting the commercialisation of the genre. Potter writes that such a 'cut-and-paste valuation of the hitherto unvalued put hip-hop in a unique relation with commodity capitalism, and concomitantly with cultural production in general' (36).

We can hear David J's live sampling every time he abruptly cuts from one mode of speech to another, or from one pitch or dynamic to another. I have not indicated every time this occurs in the annotated video of 'This is What We Do' because it is illustrated by the indication of the particular vocal effect. When David J uses this effect it sometimes appears as if words have been cut out, or sometimes as if he is making a sudden cut from one moment to another. David J does not discuss 'sampling' in our interview, however, it did come up in my interview with Kayo Chingonyi, who is interested in hip hop models of music sampling (he mentions artists including MF Doom and J-Zone) and how this technique might impact the ways we might think about copyright and ways of writing. Chingonyi suggests we can 'build' with words as 'clumps of sound': 'words can also just be seen as sounds, as little clumps of sound that we've organised, in the same way that we've organised clumps of sound and called them "music"'. He says 'we want language to be useful, a utensil', chiming with Acker's description of language that can be played with like 'clay or paint'. Chingonyi references the hip hop artist J-Zone, who apparently used to leave a VCR tape running 'while he went to sleep and then in the morning he'd play back what he had and then record the interesting stuff on audio cassette' (Chingonyi interview). This kind of compositional technique again resonates with avant-garde approaches, particularly the 'uncreative' writing of Kenneth Goldsmith who has produced a book, 'Soliloquy' containing every word he spoke for a week. As Chingonyi says, sampling (like cut-up writing techniques and the kind of 'found' uncreative writing of Goldsmith) has an impact on the ways 'we think about intellectual property and creativity in general'. The creativity of David J's live writing is the way he samples himself, splicing together his narratives and combining his vocal techniques in new ways.

To understand this combinatory approach in more detail, consider this example where David J live samples his own vocal techniques, and also cuts off his speech entirely, with [REV.E] at the end of the passage:

[PROC] Enjoy [GRAIN] every moment of your life [ECHO] life while you're here [ECHO] here and keep [REV.E] keep [REV.E] ('This is What We Do' [5:53])

The following transcriptions demonstrate how David J shifts/samples dynamics ('OneTaste') and how he live samples between modes of delivery and content ('This is

What We Do’).

So you can [DS: MID-LOUD] caress [DS: SOFT] bless [DS: LOUD] puga [DS: SOFT] listical, [DS: LOUD] un [DS: SOFT] touchable [DS: LOUD] di [DS: SOFT] abolical (‘OneTaste’ [4:38])

We are living in a multi-di- [PROC-CONVO]: come on David, continue, I will (‘This is What We Do’ [1:31-1:33])

RIP does not mean [MS: S.T-CL] so many people die in senseless wars. (Ibid. [2:29])

The mode of delivery David J uses corresponds with particular dynamics and registers and is often connected to the content of the narrative line. For instance, his ‘story-telling’ mode is delivered with a soft dynamic, in a mid-range register, and corresponds to a particular narrative line. In the first part of the poem he uses the mode to tell a story about a piece of twisted metal entering a bar (he interrupts this story with other material but uses the same mode of delivery when he returns to it). In the second half of the poem he uses the same mode to tell a story about a man who got on the train at Kings Cross on the day of the 7/7 attacks. The first example is notated below. His ‘story-telling’ mode includes the story about the twisted metal. As part of this story he uses humour to undermine the kind of ‘braggadocio’ that he opens his performance with, as he refers to himself/first-person narrator waiting for the metal to speak whilst drinking Horlicks. He then cuts to a proclaiming mode [PROC], then to a conversational mode in which he addresses himself by name with an aside [CONVO] and then returns to the story-telling [S.T] mode, then a fast [FLOW] mode as he delivers the speech in the voice of the ‘piece of twisted metal’:

[S.T] a piece of twisted metal enters the room (*pause*) At twelve o clock the metal starts to speak and say the journey it has come from. (*pause*) I wait, it’s eleven o clock, (*pause*) I put my feet on a footstool, have some Horlicks (*pause*) Jacob’s crackers, butter, (*pause*) cheese: edam (*pause*) waiting for it to speak because objects are sent to me from another time zone. [MS: S.T-PROC], ‘cause we are living in a multi-di [MS: S.T-CONVO] come on David continue I will [MS: CONVO-S.T] the metal starts to speak and it says: [MS: S.T-FLOW] The

headlights of the bus of my eyes will never flicker again. [1:05-1:45]

By taking time with the ‘story-telling’ narrative, inserting pauses to give a sense of improvisation, and including the details of Jacob’s crackers and Horlicks, David J undermines his bragging, hip hop persona and sounds more like a comfortable granddad, revealing that ‘running inside joke’ that Cobb referred to in the hip hop documentary— that ‘psychic armor’ is nothing more than armour (Hurt). Before playfully undermining this persona David J gives a brief nod to hip hop; the opening lines of ‘This is What We Do’ begin with braggadocio and Signifyin, delivered in the proclaiming [PROC] mode. The proclaiming mode, with its preacher-like connotations, high register and loud dynamic suits the boast-like nature of braggadocio (as well as more political content). The ‘OneTaste’ performance is an example of an entire performance mostly delivered in braggadocio, in the [FLOW] delivery mode. Here the use of braggadocio is contained to a few sentences and provides a punchline. Cobb writes about the use of ‘second lines’ or the ‘punchline’ within the hip hop lyric: ‘Like its ancestral inspiration, the blues, the hip hop lyric is built around a series of second lines, or what is known in the craft as the punchline’ (*To the Break of Dawn* 87). The opening line of ‘This is What We Do’ reveals a shift from [PROC] to [FLOW] for the punchline. The line is defined by pauses before and after, and gives a nod to classic hip hop technique, a kind of quotation of himself and the origins of his craft.

(pause) [PROC] I wanna bless you *(pause, head dip)* with a style *(pause, head turn to left, arm extended)* [MS: PROC-FLOW] [TS: SLOW-FAST] tighter than a claustrophobic virgin trapped in her own fallopian tube. *(silence)* *(walks away from mic, then returns...)* [0:07-0:21]

David J comments in the ‘bridge’ section of the performance: ‘[CONVO] we put those punchlines in because I’m hip hop man, I love hip hop’ [3:55]. The pause before the punchline (beginning ‘tighter...’) adds to the surprise of the second line or ‘punchline’. The pause also emphasises what Smitherman describes as a feature of Signifyin, the ‘introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected’ (121). The second phrase is an example of Signifyin, (he is siggin on a ‘lot of people’):

[FLOW] A lot of people don’t even know what to do with the lyrical because their performance is weak like a man with one [PS: HIGH-LOW] testicle. [0:28]

This pitch shift from a high to low register is quite different to the falling intonation identified in “British Spoken Word Voice”. Rather than a tailing off it is a sudden drop, and, like his use of the pause in the first line, serves to heighten the impact of the ‘punchline’. This line is one of David J’s set phrases, useful in ‘battle’, which he inserts into various performances. We hear him use the same line in the ‘OneTaste’ performance where instead of emphasising ‘testicle’ through a pitch shift, he emphasises it through the ‘inhaled word’ [IW] and echo effect:

[FLOW] performance is weak like a man with one [IW: ECHO] testicle testicle
testicle testicle testicle testicle testicle [4:41]

This example demonstrates that although David J can freestyle semantic material, he also draws on a bank of formulae, and might ‘freestyle’ the delivery mode, vocal effect and order of lines rather than the content of the line itself, tying in with the research into jazz improvisation by Paul Berliner, and Parry and Lord’s findings that oral literature improvisers often draw on set formulae.

5.7 Keep Breathing

In our interview David J talks about speaking ‘the breath out’ and says ‘people don’t realise the power of the word and the breath now’. He ends our interview with a performance full of vocal effects and includes some of the set phrases heard in other poems:

Sound 5.3 David J interview (Part 3) [3:40]



enjoy every moment of your life while you’re [IW] here (*pause*) and keep
breathing [REV.E] (*pause*) Keep breathing [I][I][BLOW][BLOW] [REV.E] Keep
breathing for those, that have lost theirs [REV.E]

This is a signature phrase; David J often performs variations of it, changing just the vocal effects (although always using the reversed exhalation effect). We can hear it at the end of the first part of ‘This is What We do’:

enjoy every moment of your life while you’re here and keep [REV.E] keep
[REV.E] keep [PS: MID-LOW] breathing for those that have lost theirs. [3:37]

He repeats this phrase at the end, this time leaving off the final words and replacing them with an inhalation:

Enjoy [GRAIN] every moment of your life [ECHO] life while you’re here
[ECHO] here and keep [REV.E] keep [I] [5:50]

David J does not need to deliver the full line, as the audience has already been taught it, so he can cut the line, replacing ‘keep breathing’ with a literal demonstration of breathing. He uses the same phrase in ‘Confessions of a Brothel Camera’, but this time he mouths the final words:

Enjoy every moment of your life while you’re here and keep breathing for those
[MOUTHS]: *that have lost theirs* [O] [10:47]

The theme of breath is central to David J’s work. His signature ‘crip’ tells us to ‘keep breathing’ for those people who no longer can. Within ‘This is What We Do’ he elaborates on the concept that poetry is a way of resurrecting the breath of the dead:

So many people die in senseless wars. And what we do... we actually resurrect
them [REV.E] their last breath in our jaws in our poems. [3:09]

The extract of the performance from our interview quoted at the beginning of this section continues:

[REV.E] Keep breathing for those, that have lost theirs [REV.E] [WHISPER]
Rest in perfection. Resurrections of the breaths of the last fallen martyrs. [REV.E]
[3:50-4:08]

David J describes how what began as a technical aspect of performing (simply the need to breathe in and out) gained signification: ‘We’re supposed to be the resurrection of the last breath of fallen martyrs, I believe that when people pass their last breath goes in the air, who inhales that?’ (interview). Thinking about his [REV.E] breath sound in this context, as a literal breathing in of someone’s last breath out, reveals how apt the descriptor ‘reversed exhalation’ is. The breath sounds like a ‘reversed exhalation’ intentionally; David J is imagining that he is breathing in (reversing) another’s exhalation; this gives the breath sound its distinctive quality, similar to that of an exhalation that is technologically reversed (Sound 4.4).

Sound 5.4 Silva, demonstrating a technologically reversed exhalation, or non-acoustic [REV.E]



5.8 Live Writing with the body

David J’s use of body is as crafted as his vocal techniques. In the ‘OneTaste’ performance we can see his physical control and how tightly his movement is choreographed. His slow motion walk onto stage is as controlled as a dancer’s.

Figure 17. 'This is What We Do' [1:01]



In our interview he told me that he grew up watching Shaolin martial arts 'and trying out various moves'. In 'This is What We Do' he demonstrates a small vocabulary of distinctive movements: using his forefinger to conduct his speech:

Figure 18. 'This is What We Do' [1:05]



He removes himself from the microphone and changes his gaze during pauses and silences, dipping his head:

Figure 19. 'This is What We Do' [3:44]



Occasionally he leaves the space, walking away from the microphone entirely. We can observe this in the opening of 'This is What We Do'. There is a six second silence during which he leaves the performance space [0:14-0:20]. At the end of the same performance, rather than receiving his applause he again walks away from the microphone. David J's physical presence or absence in the space is a feature of his live writing. This feature of David J's performances shows immense confidence in his ability to hold the audience's attention and interest even when he is not physically holding the performance space. The fact that David J chooses to be absent within his own poem reveals his awareness that his very presence is a part of his writing. This is a demonstration of what he learnt in Bristol when waiting for Amiri Baraka to reach the stage. He realised that the slow walk was a part of Baraka's poetry. Baraka's slow walk and tapping interrupted the performance space. The speed of the walk changed the rhythm of the space; the tapping sets a pace and a sound that became part of Baraka's rendition of his poetry. In his essay 'Listening', Roland Barthes writes that the 'voice, in relation to silence, is like writing (in the graphic sense) on blank paper' (254). A poet writing on a page can make use of the white space, perhaps lineating their poem unusually, perhaps not adhering to the traditional practice of left alignment, perhaps leaving open white spaces between words and imagery. The space between the words is 'written' by that poet just as much as the words are. A poet can treat the performance space as a space for writing, writing not only with speech, but with the silence and with the space itself as they move through it, and remove themselves from it. In 1952 John Cage composed with silence (four minutes and thirty three seconds of it). Likewise, a poet can write with their presence, and their absence. The way in which David J enters

the performance space, removes himself from the performance space, dips away from the microphone, walks away from it and returns are all conscious acts, part of his live writing. David J live writes with every aspect of his performance, from his physical presence in the space, to the movements of his forefinger and his use of intonation and breath.

In contrast to a performer such as Kate Tempest, who delivers her poems in one uninterrupted kind of ‘spoken word voice’, giving the sense that she is unable to stem the flow of passion behind her words, David J’s disruption of his ‘flow’ with vocal techniques and cuts between narrative lines draws our attention to the sound, materiality and skin of language. Geneva Smitherman describes ‘tonal semantics’ as when ‘the voice is employed like a musical instrument with improvisation, riffs, and all kinds of playing between the notes’ (134). David J’s performances reveal the extent to which a poet can write live using all elements of prosody. It also reveals that the distinctive intonation patterns of spoken word voice are not a result of a particular hip hop heritage, or inevitable for a poet who primarily works in performance. Conversely, it is David J’s background in the hip hop ‘battle arena’ that required him to develop such a varied and virtuosic approach to his delivery. David J’s vocal techniques reoccur across performance; it could be said that the content of his poems serves the techniques rather than vice versa, however, I would suggest that the techniques are so present that they *are* the content. David J’s vocal techniques are unusually varied, they are such a prominent feature of his performances that they *are* his poetry. Like Mikey Smith, whose ‘Laaawd’ is part of his signature style, becoming synonymous with ‘Mikey Smith’, David J’s set phrases and repertoire of distinctive vocal techniques have become the performance signature for ‘David J’. David J uses his body and voice like an instrument; watching David J in performance is like watching the instrument ‘David J’ being played.

Chapter six

Lemn Sissay: Defamiliarising the Poetry Performance

This chapter considers Lemn Sissay's performances through the lens of live writing, revealing how his use of body, voice and introductory passages and asides are part of his poetic practice. It introduces the notion of the 'performed palimpsest' to refer to the splicing together of observation, aside, commentary and self-critique that Sissay 'writes live'. This chapter demonstrates that Sissay's performances destabilise his own presence and authority in ways that can be viewed in the context of the poststructural mistrust of authorial presence explored in chapter one. I analyse Sissay's live writing in relation to Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, considering how he defamiliarises through his 'performed palimpsests' and his use of voice and gesture. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *The Report*, a one-off event at the Royal Court theatre in which Sissay takes defamiliarisation to extreme lengths by staging his own psychological report.

6.1 Introducing Lemn Sissay

Lemn Sissay's work often illustrates that any attempts at fixing his identity are exercises in (perhaps productive) failure. Bearing this in mind, here are some ways of introducing Lemn Sissay:

Lemn Sissay is one of Britain's most celebrated poets. He is British and Ethiopian. He was born in 1967. He performs his poetry and gives talks around the world. Sissay has a huge online presence.⁶⁵ His latest volume of new and selected poems *Gold from the Stone* is published by Canongate and contains poems from five previous collections from 1985-2008, as well as new work. He has an MBE. In 2015 he was appointed Chancellor of the University of Manchester. He works across forms: publishing on the page, in performance and as public artworks. He is also well known for his work campaigning for young people in care and his contributions to debates about adoption and the care system.

⁶⁵ His personal story, campaigning and work as a poet are written about regularly in the mainstream press. He blogs on his website (lemnsissay.com), has 23.5 thousand twitter followers (at time of writing) and uses twitter (@lemnsissay) to publish tweet-poems as well as communicate with his fans. His Youtube clips of talks and poetry performances have large numbers of views.

As Sissay narrates in his autobiographical solo show, *Something Dark* and confirms in *The Report*, his mother left him in the care of Wigan social services whilst she studied (this was her intention, however, social services informed his white foster family they could keep him). He didn't see another black person until he was fifteen. His white, Baptist foster family returned him to Wigan social services when he was eleven – after attempting to cast the 'devil' from him ('Something Dark' 332). At eighteen years of age he discovered his name was not 'Norman' – his social worker had named him after himself. He finally found his birth certificate, recording: 'the only truth I knew, my name Lemn Sissay' and traced his birth mother to Ethiopia (339). The events and the themes Sissay explores in *Something Dark* can be found in almost all his performances and talks since, making it a key reference point for discussions of Sissay's work.⁶⁶

In *Something Dark* Sissay describes the ways he became aware of his identity and his difference to the people around him from a young age, revealing he experienced identities as literally and metaphorically written and layered into himself, as if his own body is a palimpsest: 'folding up my darkness and gently placing it into my inner child's mouth' and 'we punctured our skin with blunt pins and blue Indian ink' (331, 336). Later he tried to get the letters 'LOVE' out of his knuckles: 'now they lie beneath my skin barely visible – like ghosts' (336). He describes himself as tattooed into his mother, as a scar: 'I had scared the living life out of her. I had the life scared out of me. I was the life that was scored into her, scarred into her' (344). These acts of self-inscription are attempts to get beneath the surface of the self, leaving permanent marks. In *Something Dark* Sissay tells us: 'I was the only proof of my own existence, my own echo, tattooing myself into myself' (336). In an interview with Deirdre Osborne, Sissay explains:

If you have nobody, how do you know that you exist? [...] I wrote, therefore I exist.
[...] On the most fundamental, base level, writing proved that I was somebody – it

⁶⁶ *Something Dark* was produced in 2003 through a partnership between Apples and Snakes (England's primary live literature organisation, founded in 1982 with a remit of representing marginalised voices), Battersea Arts Centre (an arts space in Battersea, London known for supporting experimental theatre and artists), and Contact Theatre in Manchester. It was shown at both venues and toured internationally over the following ten years. It was directed by John McGrath (who was then the Artistic Director of Contact Theatre). My references to *Something Dark* are informed by my viewing of a video recording of a later performance of the work at Battersea Arts Centre in 2006, held at the British Library, as well as the script which is published in the *Hidden Gems* anthology as one of 'Six Experimental New Plays by Black British Writers'. On the 1st March 2017 Sissay announced on his blog that *Something Dark* will be published by Oberon and included on the National syllabus.

meant that I was alive at any given time. ('Lemn Sissay's Life's Source' 321)

Writing and performing fulfils Sissay's need to prove his own existence, to leave 'permanent marks'. Osborne writes that within *Something Dark*: 'Sissay literally and literarily performs himself into being' (Ibid. 318). Extending this observation I suggest that Sissay uses performance not only to prove his own existence, but question it, check it, amplify it, ask of his audience who they see, and question how different contexts change how he is perceived and the ways he behaves on stage. Given the ways in which he destabilises his identity on stage, it is surprising that Sissay does not feature within the 'black British avant-garde' discussed and speculated upon in the writings of Romana Huk, Lauri Ramey and Victoria Arana, key commentators on black British poetry. This may be connected to the fact that the more avant-garde aspects of Sissay's practice are not visible on the page. It is also possible that he is generally not included within discussions of avant-garde poetry because, as Romana Huk points out, black poets' connections to 'the oral tradition' may be seen as incompatible with the (white) British avant-garde:

I suspect the verdict long ago was that these poets engage too closely with the oral tradition that their [the avant-garde] work must confront as its different and potent predecessor, and that they therefore partake in a naïve identity-politicking incompatible with the British avant-garde's own style of language-centered critique. (38)

Sissay's work, in common with the work of all poets who perform, has connections to oral traditions; however, his performances constantly confront the idea that the mere presence of the poet on stage uttering 'I' and reciting poetry informed by their life results in 'naïve identity-politicking'. It is true, as Denise Riley says, that the 'strange convention of the poetry reading ushers in the theatrical self with a vengeance' (80) and that, as Peter Middleton states, a performing 'poet *performs* authorship' (33). However, Lemn Sissay writes live with these properties of the poetry performance. He plays with 'the theatrical self' that the poetry performance 'ushers in' and '*performs* authorship', pushing the inherent theatricality of the poetry performance far beyond 'naïve identity-politicking'.

In his essay exploring experimental practice in Black British poetry, Anthony Joseph

acknowledges the ‘innovation in the performance art of Lemn Sissay’ and says that at the time (1980s), he and others ‘were the avant-garde’ but that now they are mainstream (‘The Continuous Diaspora’ 152). If we see avant-garde/mainstream in terms of visibility and success (one of the several ways Joseph uses the category), then this is of course true. However, although it is typical for writers within the British avant-garde to be far less visible than Sissay, the avant-garde is usually defined less by popularity than by an aesthetic and approach, as Joseph himself outlines (151), quoting Ramey who describes avant-garde poetry as questioning ‘the nature and possibility of the non-problematic speaking subject’ (‘Diaspora and the Avant-Garde’ 190). Viewing Sissay’s performances in the context of this interest in destabilising the speaking subject opens up exciting approaches to exploring and critiquing his work.

Cornelia Gräbner summarises Lemn Sissay’s approach to performance in a short piece entitled ‘Is Performance Poetry Dead?’ in which she suggests that Sissay’s work can be described using a concept from Richard Schechner’s work within performance studies, the notion of ‘showing doing’ (Schechner 28). Schechner uses the term to describe performance as an act that ‘shows’ what in daily life is simply ‘done’. Gräbner adapts this to suggest that Sissay shows the audience what is ‘done’ in a typical poetry performance, thereby presenting ‘a performance of the poetry performance’ (81). Her description of Sissay’s performance at the Poetry International debate summarises the distinctive nature of Sissay’s performances:

His seemingly chaotic ‘recital’ of two poems – which was accompanied by interspaced comments, stuttering, apparent indecision about which poem to recite, breaking off a poem after a few lines because he did not like the way he was reciting it, and other ‘failures’ – was in fact a performance of the poetry performance: an attempt to show what goes on in the poet when he has to perform, and to deconstruct his own authority as a poet while claiming, instead, that of a human being. (81)

Sissay’s long introductions appear to be improvised, and are filled with hesitations, indecision and restarts, and what Gräbner describes as ‘failures’. In her thesis Gräbner expands on her discussion of ‘failures’ in Sissay’s work, describing the ‘failure of communication’ within his performances as a staging of a literal, inevitable failure, due to the conventions and contexts of the poetry performance, which places the audience in a position of being unable to actually respond, meaning that his poems ‘must fail as a

performative speech act'. Gräbner suggests Sissay becomes frustrated and his performances fail because his audiences do not 'open up and cooperate' (*Off the page* 171, 155, 172).

Within postdramatic theatre, 'failure' is often celebrated as a performance aesthetic, and indeed considered a success.⁶⁷ The aesthetics of failure can be seen in the work of the contemporary theatre companies such as Goat Island, Lone Twin and Forced Entertainment. The performers in Forced Entertainment and the work of director Tim Etchells explore the struggle for communication: hesitations, slip-ups and mistakes. This focus on failure(s) is now so established as an aesthetic choice that it has become an emergent performance style. Sarah Jane Bailes has studied the aesthetics of failure in *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* in which she writes that failure 'works' and not only works but is productive: 'strategies of failure in the realm of performance can be understood as generative, prolific even; failure produces, and does so in a roguish manner' (2-3). Although Sissay performs 'indecision', he does so in a confident, 'roguish' way, using large gestures and charisma. His energy is expansive, he jokes with the audience, exploring bigger and absurdist gestures and tangents. Sissay's work has a different aesthetic to the performances of the companies that are Bailes' case studies (such as Goat Island and Forced Entertainment), however, the use of failure to generate material, and to do so roguishly (as if breaking some unofficial law), is applicable and contextualises Sissay's performances within contemporary performance practice more widely.

6.2 Performed Palimpsests

Although 'performed palimpsest' might suggest something more contained than these moments and narratives often are, the phrase provides an evocative way of referring to the live writing that Sissay performs alongside his poems. A 'palimpsest' usually refers to the erasure and overlaying of texts on the page. As with the term 'live writing', which brings together the live event of performance with the act of inscribing words, the term 'performed palimpsest' also brings together two activities more often located in different spaces, the first on the stage, the second on the page. I use the phrase

⁶⁷ The term 'postdramatic theatre' was coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his study of the same name and refers to theatre that rejects or subverts principles of drama, such as character, story and the use of a pre-existing script.

‘performed palimpsest’ to evoke a notion of live writing that is effaced, re-written, overlaid and corrected. Although the writing is invisible and inaudible once uttered, it remains in the audience’s, as well as the performer’s ‘residual awareness’. In *Psychophysical Acting*, the theatre director Phillip Zarrilli describes residual awareness:

As the point to which one attends shifts, primary attention is directed to the new point, but one must nevertheless maintain a residual/secondary awareness of the feel and quality of one’s relationship to the previous moment. (104)

For Zarrilli this concept is integral to the actor’s technique, enabling them to connect or cut off their energy and awareness as they choose. During all spoken performance we maintain a ‘residual awareness’ of what has been uttered previously. The notion of ‘residual awareness’ is more appropriate to the psychophysical way we experience poetry than the cerebral principle of ‘working memory’ referred to in cognitive poetics which posits that we hold a certain allocation of actual lines in our memory (Fabb). Sissay’s attempts and re-attempts at introductions, his asides, his tangents, corrections and elaborations, can be viewed as ‘performed palimpsests’ that play with his and the audience’s residual awareness as part of the construction of live writing.

A transcript of Sissay’s performance as part of a series entitled ‘Conversations with African Poets and Writers’ at the Library of Congress in 2015 shows that he introduces his poem ‘Invisible Kisses’ numerous times and each time breaks off to comment.⁶⁸ He begins the first line of the poem twice before eventually reciting it in full. This section of his performance, from the first introduction of the poem: ‘This poem is called Invisible K... sorry for speaking. I speak a lot and I I I I write’, until the end of the poem itself is about 900 words long, only 258 of which are the poem in its published form.⁶⁹ Typically we might describe these passages as introductions, but this doesn’t encompass the length, breadth, tangents and creativity that Sissay imbues them with. Their equivalent on the page would be introductions, notes in the margins, scribbles

⁶⁸ The event took place in the African and Middle Eastern Division of the Library of Congress in Washington on the 6th July 2015 as part of a series entitled ‘Conversations with African Poets and Writers’. The event appears to be attended by predominantly African and African American audience members. The room and set up is formal. The audience are seated on chairs. Sissay performs, standing at a lectern with the panelled wall of the library behind him.

⁶⁹ ‘Invisible Kisses’ is published in *Gold from the Stone* (109). The recording of Sissay’s performance at the Library of Congress and transcript are available online.

over the text and footnotes – footnotes that often become the poem themselves, taking up whole pages. We can describe the 642 words that introduce, contextualise, critique and reflect on the poem and Sissay as a poet, as a ‘performed palimpsest’, a text that is erased and re-written live. The comparative length of the palimpsest to the poem alone demonstrates how important this aspect of Sissay’s performances is.

Sissay uses these performed palimpsests to defamiliarise the context of performance. On stage, he continually asks (explicitly and implicitly): Who am I? Who do you see? Who do you want me to be? Who am I now? Is this what you want? Is this what you expect of me? Am I black enough? Am I poet enough? He disrupts, argues with and destabilises these questions and their imagined answers. Unlike *Something Dark*, many of the poems he performs do not ask these questions within their published forms on the page. In performance, Sissay asks these questions in the introductions, and sometimes even interrupts his rendition of a poem to question the audience, and himself. In so doing he makes a new text, a performed palimpsest, a splicing together of observation, questioning and poem that only exists in performance, a kind of self-critique of the moment of performance as it is happening.

In a similar way to David J who reuses certain phrases and vocal techniques in different orders in different poems, Sissay re-uses particular comments and asides within his performed palimpsests. Sissay takes on a role of self-critic during his performed palimpsest at the Library of Congress. He gives us information about himself as a poet and his status: ‘I think of myself as a radical poet, and I like to read love poetry, I read it at the Pan African Congress, Conference, at the LSE in the mid-1980s’. This indicates the longevity of his career and his status within African literatures. Sissay contextualises himself as ‘a radical poet’, pointing out that reading a love poem is ‘a radical thing to do’. He compares himself to the rapper, Tupac Shakur, ‘a love poet’. He invites us to view his decision to read a love poem as ‘radical’, and indeed to view love as ‘radical’. He tells us: ‘This poem gets read at a wedding once every two weeks, somewhere in the world’ indicating his popularity and at the same time commenting on the financial context of the poem, the life of a jobbing poet whose poem is used without royalties: ‘So they pay me? No.’ Having pointed out the injustice he then foregrounds his own success and generosity with: ‘It’s all good, it’s online if you want it’. Sissay goes on to explore love, his relationship to love, battle with love, the closeness of love to anger, and how ‘anger is an expression of the need for love’. As well as performing

the role of critic, he performs the role of his own therapist. He tells us ‘I refuse not to love’. His refusal not to love, in spite of ‘everything that I’ve been through’ points towards how loving is ‘radical’, part of his refusal to allow the ways he has been treated to impact on his capacity to love. This extract is part of the extended performed palimpsest; Sissay’s explorations of love and anger lead him to a playful and incisive commentary on racism in England:

Maybe apply for some funding, to accommodate you within this society. I spent my life with people saying, (*nasal voice*) you’re not black, you’re a human being. It’s like saying, you know, it’s just er. That’s people I don’t know just stopping me on the street you know what I mean? Randomly, (*repeats a gesture that he did on the first ‘randomly’ – both hands splay on the word*) randomly. Okay, so, so was that, (*repeats the gesture a couple more times*) Library of Congress, was that okay? (*laughter*) (*gesture several more times*) ‘randomly’ is that OK? Can we laugh here, is that okay? Okay, good, good, good. Good good good good good. Is that black enough, by the way? I’m just wondering if this is er – is laughing black enough, you know what I mean? Am I? Because I really want... I want the ticket, you know what I’m saying? I want the ticket. I’m like, if I laugh am I less black, you know what I mean? If I... (*gestures*) I get confused in England because I try to contextualize myself. Apparently if I’m angry, I’m black. (*high voice*) Who knew? But if I have a fully rounded personality, you know, that’s kind of, I don’t know what that is? – what is that? What is that? (*exaggerated gestures with arms thrusting forwards*) I’m sorry, Prince Ermias. (*giggles*) This is er, this poem is called ‘Invisible Kisses’. It’s funny though isn’t it, the subtlety of of, of England as well. The subtlety of acceptance, you know, the rules of engagement. This poem is called ‘Invisible Kisses’. ‘If there was ever one’, OK, because I’ve never had that, I’ve never believed in those, those rules of engagement, there is something much bigger, much stronger, a much more truthful bridge between all people than the rules of engagement that are set to separate, significant much more profound.⁷⁰
(‘Library of Congress’) [23:42]

Sissay questions what the Library of Congress expects him to represent, referring to ‘the

⁷⁰ I have borrowed from a transcript made available by the Library of Congress and have corrected some mistakes and inserted some omissions that the transcriber found ‘inaudible’. I have added a description of his gestures in brackets (please refer to the video for clarification).

rules of engagement’, de-contextualising his physical gestures, repeating and exaggerating them and asking: ‘Is laughing black enough?’ He critiques and comments on his own performance as it happens, repeating (and defamiliarising) some of the gestures that accompany his own speech. Sissay plays his live audience off against other audiences, countries, assumptions and expectations. ‘Apparently if I’m angry, I’m black’ critiques those in British society who hold the stereotype of ‘angry black man’. This performance is in front of a predominantly African and African American audience that includes Prince Ermias of Ethiopia. Sissay’s reference to the Prince and the Library (and comparison to England) within his adlibbing demonstrates his awareness of the way the context impacts the ways he might be perceived.

Questions such as what it means to be ‘black enough’ are embedded in Sissay’s discourse, a returning motif across his performances, with different resonances in different contexts. At TedX Salford he critiques the ‘patronising’ statements made by white people: ‘you’re not black you’re a human being’ and points out the racism of white people who don’t ‘see colour’: ‘they only say they never see colour when they see colour’ (‘Morning Breaks’ [13:00; 12:20-12:38]). In an interview with Molly Thompson the poet Patience Agbabi discusses similar territory: ‘Obviously I’m a Black writer, of course I’m a Black writer – I’m not in denial about it, but I think there is a danger and I don’t like it when promoters bill you or label you in a certain way’ (153). In our interview Sissay told me that he will not always fulfil a programmer’s expectations of him: ‘I’ve had to say no – this is the way I do it. Some days it’ll be like this and some days it’ll be like this’.

Sissay makes reference to the wider systems of funding and how funding is used as a marker of ‘acceptance’: ‘Maybe apply for some funding to accommodate you within this society’. Sissay often critiques societal structures with a performed palimpsest on the topic of funders and bureaucracy. In his talk for the Nantucket Project after mentioning ‘Mohammed, from the Koran’ (in a list of examples of famous orphans), he takes a tangent:

it can be discussed, OK, it can be discussed. Maybe we should split up into small groups and discuss whether that was a relevant joke to say in this environment, but to split up into small groups we’d need a worker to administrate the process and to get a worker to administrate the process we’d have to apply for funding. To

apply for funding we'd have to justify our existence through a constitution.

Anyway, that's a whole other story. ('Poetry is the Voice' [2:13])

Sissay's improvisations are 'generative', the word Bailes used to describe failure that 'works' (2). When Sissay pushes his narratives into a realm where they might (and sometimes do) fail, he keeps going, pushing further and further, and in so doing his 'failures' generate more material and become successful, and often very funny. At a performance I saw in Birmingham ('Level Up' at the Birmingham Rep in 2016), he pushed the theme of funding applications and bureaucracy further. This palimpsest was described by an audience member (seeing Sissay for the first time) as 'a hilarious satire about communities and funders etc. With multiple characters'. The audience member was 'in stitches' (personal communication).

Growing up surrounded by white people foregrounded Sissay's experience of difference and lack of community. Osborne writes: 'his deprivation of any sense of origin, which a biological family context offers, produced a sense of disembodiment and insubstantiality' ('Lemn Sissay's Life's Source' 319). In performance Sissay is fully present, embodied, but at the same time he is separate from the community of audience, who are looking at him and playing out a 'contract' that takes on different signification with different audiences and contexts. On stage he may be expected to embody 'the Black poet': when watched by a white audience this re-stages the experience of being the only black person he knew growing up; when watched by an African American audience he is the 'black British Ethiopian poet', bringing experiences of racism in Britain, joking about what is considered 'black enough'. In their introductions, riffs and adlibbing, his poetry performances address all the questions of identity and belonging that are woven throughout *Something Dark*, continually re-playing questions such as: Who do you want me to be? Am I with you? Am I not with you?

The 2008 Free Verse Report discusses the 'tick box' nature of funding specific to poets of colour, contextualising Sissay's preoccupation with the 'subtlety of acceptance, you know, the rules of engagement' ('Invisible Kisses') in relation to funders and organisations:

Funding bodies' criteria for awards usually include stipulations about ethnicity and gender. While the system ensures that organisers and editors acknowledge the Black

and Asian voice, it can backfire. “People want to tick boxes,” observes Lawrence. “I am a female Asian poet and that is two boxes ticked.” Organisers need to think outside these boxes. In the meantime, BME poets either play along or miss out on the rare opportunities to be heard. (Kean 8)

As was identified in the Free Verse Report, often, ‘poets are asked to represent “the Black Voice” at events...’ as if this is an additional role to that of ‘the poet’. As Patricia Williams comments in her Reith Lecture: ‘There’s that clunky social box larger than your body taking up all that space. You need two chairs at the table: one for you, one for your blackness’ (BBC Radio 4). At the same time as questioning the contract between performer and audience as it is being played out, Sissay asks these wider questions of what he is expected to represent within society, why he is on that stage, who is paying him to be there, what the infrastructure is behind it all, and in so doing, he undermines any audience expectations of what he should be and what poetry is. His relationship with institutions is not a simple one: it was institutions, councils, and the state that failed Sissay so comprehensively throughout his childhood. Now, public funding and institutions often fund his performances and appearances. His joke at the Library of Congress: ‘Maybe apply for some funding to accommodate you within this society’ is uneasy. The word ‘accommodate’ has uncomfortable undertones, suggesting the act of finding a place for someone who doesn’t automatically fit in. Even when Sissay is commissioned, programmed and paid to be on stage, his joke suggests he might still have the sense that he is being *accommodated* by the institutions who request his presence.

After one of the introductions to ‘Invisible Kisses’ he begins the first line of the poem, then stops and adjusts the microphone stand, possibly deciding in that moment not to continue the poem because adjusting the stand has interrupted it. Or perhaps he never intended to read the full poem as he was still thinking about the context around it. Sissay uses his multiple failures to begin the poem to generate writing, to structure this performed palimpsest, which moves from love to anger to racism, systems, society and to pain, all of which Sissay has had to navigate in order to write the poem. Although the performed palimpsest around ‘Invisible Kisses’ appears to go off on many tangents, it is a development of the question of what love means for Sissay. Sissay’s performed palimpsest returns to this question, zooming out from the personal to the structures and societies, the ‘rules of engagement’ that impact the individual and the individual’s

ability to love. Couples may read ‘Invisible Kisses’ at weddings around the world without knowledge of Sissay’s experiences and without thinking about any contexts other than their own relationship. When Sissay’s persona is not the subject of the poem, there is space for others to insert themselves as subject. However, in performance he is always the subject, and everything that enabled him to write the poem becomes part of the experience of the poem, removing the possibilities for audience members to relate the poem to themselves and at the same time revealing that there can be no such thing as a simple love poem.

The performed palimpsest informs the way we experience the poem itself when it is finally read. Sissay makes himself – his thoughts, his experiences, his contexts, his physicality – present to such an extent that we are forced to hear the poem in relation to everything he has told us. Although it is an abstract poem, not referring to any specific person or event, the performed palimpsest ensures that we can’t listen to the poem, when it finally arrives, without the residual awareness of the speech that preceded it; Sissay’s persona and his undermining and questioning of the context remain in the foreground. However, the defamiliarising of gesture, the tangents, and the unpredictability of Sissay’s narrative makes it impossible to find him, or, as Brecht would have it, we cannot feel our way into him as a character (‘On Chinese Acting’ 15). He makes the transaction far more complex.

6.3 Defamiliarisation, ‘making the familiar strange’

I travelled back to Brecht via my interview with Sissay. When I asked Sissay about his use of gesture in a performance at the Nottingham Playhouse he referenced the theatre work of Tim Crouch:

I was doing that [a gesture] and then I thought... oh this is fun [Sissay demonstrates a pointing gesture with both hands that starts to spiral] just longer than they could [...] just taking it further and further and I wish more poets did that, and I wish I did it more too... it takes you into the Tim Crouch realm... do you know what I mean? Every poet on stage should see Tim Crouch because of how he deconstructs.

Sissay admires the way the theatre maker Tim Crouch ‘deconstructs’ the moment of live performance, examining it as it happens, and working with ‘layer after layer’. This

aspect of Crouch's work can be traced back to Brecht, as the critic David Chadderton, reviewing *The Author* at The Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, writes:

Crouch's theatre embodies Brecht's concept of a theatre that embraces its theatricality to make an audience think much more deeply about issues that seem commonplace or obvious. (*British Theatre Guide*)

A similar Brechtian approach to acknowledging and exposing the contrived nature of performance can be found in Sissay's performances. Sissay makes the conventions of performance strange in order to question them. Sissay defamiliarises the poetry performance as context and event, and defamiliarises himself in the role of 'poet'.

In *Citation and Modernity* Claudette Sartillot discusses the convergences between Derrida's deconstruction and Brecht's defamiliarisation, observing that both are interested in changing 'the way we think', 'making the familiar appear strange' and in deconstructing 'particular systems of thought from the inside' (120). In chapter one I suggest that Derrida's expanded notion of writing as 'inscription in general' might include the inscription of words in the air that occurs (metaphorically) in poetry performances (Derrida 9). If *writing* can occur out loud, perhaps this disrupts the binary of speech and writing.

In *For More Than One Voice*, Adriana Cavarero postpones tackling the problem of aligning Derrida's writings with a discussion of speech until her appendix, 'Dedicated to Derrida'. Cavarero points out that by locating in the voice the fundamental question of metaphysics, 'Derrida forces philosophy to account for the theme of the voice' (214). Cavarero identifies that the problem is to understand what it is that this voice, according to Derrida, privileges, and whether it 'is really a sonorous voice' or a 'metaphorical voice' (215, 225). To condense a complex discussion, Cavarero demonstrates that in 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida misunderstands Plato, who does not elevate speech, but ideas, locating *presence* in the idea (232). Cavarero notes that in 'Aphorism, Countertime', a critique of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Derrida 'symptomatically misses the opportunity to deepen the theme of vocalic uniqueness along with Shakespeare' (236). Cavarero (confirming my observations in "Ways of Listening") states that listening 'attentively' is 'something that, evidently, philosophers refuse to do, perhaps because they are concentrated on the silent and solitary work of writing' (234).

It *could* be argued that Sissay deconstructs binary oppositions of black/ white, presence/absence, speech/writing in his performances, that his destabilising of his own presence speaks to Derrida's discussions on logocentrism, and that his tangents and performed palimpsests are deferrals of the poem and stable meaning. However, the absence of discussion of actual heard voice makes it a stretch (or a separate project) to discuss Derrida's writings in relation to an analysis of Sissay's performances. The approach would require an interrogation of Derrida's ideas that risks privileging Derrida in a study that aims to begin from the poet rather than the theory. As Sartiliot describes, Brecht and Derrida share an interest in inhabiting structures in order to reveal their contradictions (121). A key difference is that Brecht turns his attention to theatre and politics, and Derrida to Western metaphysics. Brecht's discussions and theories are directly applicable to live performance and Sissay's use of his body and voice. Although Derrida's ways of thinking are traces throughout this chapter, and inform the poststructural questioning of authority and meaning that contextualise my discussions of Sissay's work, the applicability of Brecht's writings and the complexities of Derrida's make defamiliarisation the more useful notion to activate.

In his essay 'Theatre for Learning' written in the 1930s, Brecht explains the differences between his 'epic form' and the established 'dramatic form':

The presentation exposed the subject matter and the happenings to a process of de-familiarization. De-familiarization was required to make things understood. When things are "self-evident," understanding is simply dispensed with. (25)

In this quotation *Verfremdung* has been translated as 'defamiliarisation'. The Brecht scholar David Barnett reflects on the term's translation:

The term has been rendered in English over the years as 'alienation', 'estrangement' and 'defamiliarisation', among other things. A better translation, however, is 'making the familiar strange'. (76)

Barnett chooses to keep the German *Verfremdung* in his study, as it 'captures this [making the familiar strange] in a single word' (Ibid). Barnett's preferred translation reveals how close Brecht's concept is to Victor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie*, which also means 'making strange' and is usually translated as 'defamiliarisation'. I use the

word ‘defamiliarisation’; this captures ‘making the familiar strange’ in a single English word. I understand ‘defamiliarisation’ to mean ‘making the familiar strange’.

For Brecht, defamiliarisation ‘reveals the conventions’ of theatre, helps achieve an ‘admirable distance from the events portrayed’ removing the action ‘from the realm of the self-evident’ (‘On Chinese Acting’ 16, 17, 16). It prevents his audience from empathising unquestioningly, as was the convention at the time within European theatre.⁷¹ Brecht thought defamiliarisation necessary ‘for the criticism of society and for historical reporting on changes already accomplished’ (Ibid. 22). Sissay likewise uses performance devices to critique society, prompting the audience to think not only about the conventions of performance but also the systems and constructs that have placed him in the position of poet and performer. As Sartillot writes of Brecht and Derrida, Sissay makes the familiar appear strange and deconstructs systems of thought from the inside ‘in order to reveal its contradictions’ (121). In ‘Theatre for Learning’ Brecht talks about the presentation of his epic theatre as exposing ‘the subject matter and the happenings to a process of de-familiarization. De-familiarization was required to make things understood’ (25). Sartillot writes:

when Brecht quotes the conventions of the dramatic theater, it is not simply to parody them and reveal their obsolete character, but to deconstruct the bourgeois values embedded in them and accepted by the spectator as reality. (140)

Sissay told me that he started to interrupt his performances in order to question and challenge the conventions of performance and the expectations of him as poet and performer. It was when performing to a white, middle class audience that Sissay realised: ‘oh shit I’m being paid to be angry to the people that I’m being angry with... I can’t continue on that basis...’ And so Sissay started to ‘deconstruct’ (his word), to question what a poet is, what he is expected to represent, and the ‘contract’ that exists between poet and audience:

I come back to this ‘I’m a poet’. I follow that path, not the path of any political idea of who or what I am or who and what the audience is. That’s when I started to deconstruct on stage... “Oh so you’re clapping at the end of the poem which is about

⁷¹ European theatre was following developments in naturalism begun by André Antoine in Nineteenth Century France and dominated by Stanislavski’s school of acting.

being angry about x, y and z, there's some contract here that nobody's talking about, and I'm being paid to be here, so don't we need to look at that?" That's really how it started. I think it's quite exciting to tear the emperor's clothes off the façade... tear them off... They're not there anyway... and to make a display of that and then to say "so what am I in this?" (interview)

Sissay not only parodies but also questions the values and expectations of his audiences and programmers. He explains his urge to expose the subject and the context in order to question it and see it more clearly. He defamiliarises the event of the poetry performance to examine it, like Brecht, to 'make things understood'. This is, as Sissay said in our interview 'a very dangerous thing to do'. It becomes 'dangerous' through its liveness, through the possibility of real failure, and through his exposing of the forms of failure that are embedded in the contract – being paid to be angry with the people he is angry with. Although Sissay often defamiliarises in similar ways across performances, he maintains this sense of danger and unpredictability, sometimes taking his audience out of a sense of safety. His use of interruption is key to this:

One of the most nuts things I did, turned out to be incredibly powerful was read a poem 'Gold from the Stone' which I've been reading for years, ever since I wrote it, and then stop in the middle, have you seen me do that? Stop in the middle and say "how am I doing?" Be really broken down... "Is this performance?" "Is this OK?" In a different voice, down here, and then go back to the poem: Gold from a stone, oil from the earth, I yearn for my home from the time of my... "am I doing OK?" (interview)

Sissay examines the contract between audience and performer as it happens, and questions who is clapping, what they are clapping, and why they are clapping. Sissay makes the situation of the live poetry performance – one that has established conventions and is generally very predictable – feel strange. Through his interruptions, through his performed palimpsests, he inhabits conventions and defamiliarises them, removing all the rules that normally allow an audience to relax. Sissay can never know the individual experiences and expectations that impact his audience's acts of listening and interpreting, and therefore he is playing with the wider apparatus of the poetry event and society, and assumed reactions. Perhaps it is this impossibility of knowing his audience that drives Sissay to question their perception and judgments of him in the

live moment of performance.

Sissay's poems are often tightly written to a form. Because of their regular metre and structures these poems cannot be improvised and re-structured in performance without disrupting their form. The tightness of the form is in contrast to the performed palimpsests that often introduce and interrupt the poems. Sissay's poems often ask big questions of love, belonging and home. I asked Sissay to elaborate on the reasons behind intervening in his own poem and interrupting its structure in the way he describes:

In my head this is how it is, it's very twisted by the way, but it's like: "Is this how you like to see me?" I'm doing the Maya Angelou poem, the big moment poem, then I'm like "is this it then? Have I arrived now? Are we all okay with this? Is this the black poet is this the jazz poet is this the dub poet is this the blah poet?"

Perhaps, having 'proved' he exists, as he told Osborne was the reason for his writing as a young person, now he is testing that existence. He asks, 'so what am I in this?' The 'I' in all this might not be a stable, authoritative 'I', but a sense of self that is connected to contexts, society and expectations. In the moment when he might be seen to have 'arrived' he shakes this certainty, asking what this means, what function he has fulfilled. He prevents his audience from being 'all okay with this'. The voice in the printed poem 'Gold from the Stone' is the 'lyric I' and is not disrupted or interrupted by different voices or rhythms. However, in performance, when Sissay interrupts his poem, breaking down and asking questions of his audience in a different voice, he disrupts this stable lyric I and the apparent authority of the poem's regular metre and form. He also prevents himself from falling into any kind of regular 'Poet Voice'. Just as the falling tones of spoken word voice can make a poem feel closed, final and authoritative, Sissay's practice of disrupting his own poems and interfering with their rhythms, both semantically and sonically disrupts any sense that his is a stable, authoritative identity. The introduction of a different voice – with its differing physical attributes of pitch and timbre, as well as its different style (conversational and hesitant rather than authoritative and lyric) – plays off two versions of the 'poet' against each other. We could say the 'poet' interrupts the 'poem', preventing the poem (the writing) from speaking for itself – to borrow the phrase explored in chapter one – revealing that the presence of the poet is always a part of the 'writing', whether acknowledged, minimised or consciously

played with in performance.

The avant-garde poet Denise Riley speculates on the discomfort of the lyric I when she writes that the ‘borderline inauthenticity of the lyric “I” gets relieved only inside the performed I’s speaking, where everyone, you hope, finally sees the truth of the matter – that it isn’t you’ (80). Both attempting to write and perform in order to prove one’s own existence and writing and performing as an attempt to disprove one’s existence reveal Riley’s uncomfortable sense that ‘it isn’t you’, that no such stable proof can ever be attained. Both are ways of exploring or revealing ways in which the familiar (the self, the convention of the poetry event, the gaze of the audience), is *strange*. In our interview, after Sissay’s explanation of why he ‘deconstructs’ his own performance in the moment it happens (‘Have I arrived now... Is this the black poet...’), I asked him if this undermining and questioning enables him to say ‘No, I’m not’ and he responded with: ‘or am I? This all sounds so definitive, definite but I’m not am I not? Is this right?’ When standing on a stage Sissay has multiple gazes on him, and a funding apparatus and society around him, all of which might be ‘proof’ of his existence. But this proof, like the moment of performance, is always ephemeral. The gaze of his audience is constantly updating and changing in response to multiple factors including the context, their experiences and moods, and Sissay’s actions on stage.

Sissay as ‘author’ is very much present on stage, he is the topic up for discussion, as Dale Edwards observed in a review of his poetry performances in Manchester, ‘the only topic up for discussion was Lemn Sissay himself’ (*The Mancunion*), but he is not a stable presence, not a presence that has ever been ‘found’. He is a presence that is constantly updating, constantly aware that he is never able to define himself and that he is defined and re-defined through the gazes of others. He does not perform the kind of fixed authority that Barthes was wary of in his essay ‘Death of the Author’, where he stated: ‘when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’ – victory to the critic’ (147). When reading a poem to an audience in the form it appears on the page, the poem appears to be finished, already written, its meanings somehow encased in its closed form. By using so much of his stage time to defamiliarise his position on a stage and in society, questioning his own validity as a speaking subject and the audience’s assumptions of what kind of a speaking subject he is, Sissay demonstrates a need to destabilise his own presence and the gaze and experience of his audiences that is very similar to the poststructural mistrust of authorial presence.

6.4 Defamiliarising ‘Gold from the Stone’ at Porchester Hall, London and The Nantucket Project, Massachusetts

‘Gold from the Stone’ evokes the elements and appears to narrate the natural order of the world, in a similar form to a classical creation myth. Creation myths are archetypal stories found in all cultures. Within the UK the creation myth many are familiar with (and the one Sissay’s Baptist foster family would have taught him) is now fixed in print in the bible and is associated with church buildings, vicars and Sunday schools. ‘Gold from the Stone’ is more like an oral creation-myth connected to the elements rather than a higher authorial power. The poem is written in quatrains, with two beats per line. The refrain is ‘Gold from the stone,/Oil from the earth,/ I yearned for my home/From the time of my birth.’ Sissay writes about Ethiopia, a home, and a culture that he yearned for but did not experience until adulthood. On first glance the poem evokes elemental feelings of creation, belonging, and the connection of the person to the land, but the imagery is actually of plundering the earth, extracting oil from it, and a kind of alchemy: extracting gold from stone. It is a man-made origin story in which humans interfere with the natural order of the world.

This section considers the ways Lemn Sissay defamiliarises his live writing through his use of voice and physicality during two performances of ‘Gold from the Stone’. My focus is on his renditions of the poem rather than the ‘performed palimpsests’ around them. The first performance I discuss took place in London in November 2015 as part of Ethiopia’s celebrations for the World Travel Market 2015 (2nd-5th Nov) in Porchester Hall, a grand location with wood panelled walls. The second performance takes place in Massachusetts for an institution called the ‘Nantucket Project’, where the poem is embedded within an autobiographical lecture. I consider both performances in order to track how Sissay’s use of voice and body are formalised as part of his performance, revealing the ways in which he consciously ‘writes’ with his voice and body, and the extent to which these aspects of his performance are adapted for different contexts.

Sissay’s use of his body does not mirror the way he uses his body in daily life. His amplification of energy and deconstruction of persona is physical as well as verbal. Sissay has ‘re-routed’ his energy, as Eugenio Barba puts it in his explanation of what he

describes as the 'dilated body':

The flow of energies which characterise our daily behaviour has been re-routed. The tensions which secretly govern our normal way of being physically present come to the surface in the performer, become visible, unexpectedly. (54)

The techniques Eugenio Barba identifies as ways of enabling a performer to be present (and 'believable') include the use of extra-daily balance, and principles of 'opposition'. In *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Barba breaks down the intangible notions of 'presence' and 'energy' that create a 'dilated body' into attributes that can be identified across performance traditions, such as 'extra-daily' balance and 'dynamic opposition'. He looks at the technique of dancers and actors, from ballerinas and mime artists, to Balinese dancers and Noh theatre, observing principles of 'opposition' in the way they move, the way their spines twist, their balance is unequally distributed, and their shoulders are asymmetrical.

In the performance of 'Gold from the Stone' at Porchester Hall, the difference in energy between Sissay's performed palimpsest and the opening of the poem is considerable. During the introduction [0:13-1:05] we can observe all the elements of a 'dilated body': extra-daily balance, use of eyes, and the principle of opposition. His gaze shifts to different parts of the audience, he folds his arms [0:46], and uses his torso, eyes and face [0:53]. At second 0:48, (before he begins the poem) we can observe the principle of 'opposition' when Sissay moves slightly forwards before pulling back his torso and widening his eyes, achieving a position of 'extra-daily balance':

Figure 20. ‘Lemn Sissay performs’ [0:48]



Sissay’s eyes are part of the action of his body, performing ‘the action of seeing’; as Barba has observed in the eyes of performers across traditions: ‘seeing is not looking with the eyes; it is an action which engages the entire body’ (109).

Then when he begins the poem, his physicality changes. During the opening stanzas of the poem Sissay repeatedly flicks through his book [1:27-1:45] and adjusts the microphone stand [1:11; 1:13; 1:23].

Figure 21. ‘Lemn Sissay performs’ [1:13]



The transcript of the poem (below) is taken from performance, however, the line breaks are as they appear in the 2016 edition of *Gold from the Stone* available on Google Books. The poem appears online between ‘Spell Bound’ and ‘Everything Is Rhythmical’, presumably on page forty-five. However, I have purchased the ‘same’ book in hardback copy, and it does not feature this poem. Sissay’s performance misses out a verse (after ‘costumed, cultured and proud – the verse is also printed in *Rebel Without Applause*, the book he reads from). The only other difference between the version reproduced here and in *Rebel Without Applause* is the use of punctuation: Can’t give light to the sun, /Nor a drink to the sea, /The earth I must stand upon/I shall kiss with my history’. I have noted the physical and vocal gestures in brackets in a way that artificially interrupts the poem on the page. The recording should be referred to alongside this text:

Water cupped in hands
Taken from the stream, (*adjusts mic stand*)
Brought upon a laughing land
Through the mouth of a scream.

Gold from the stone, (*body twists and adjusts stand*)
Oil from the earth, (*body twists and adjusts stand*) (*during the next lines he flicks through his book*)
I yearned for my home
From the time of my birth.

Strength of a mother's whisper
Shall carry me until (*looks down at book, still flicking*)
The hand of my lost sister (*flicks again, continues flicking during following*)
Joins on to my will. (*possibly finds the poem on the page at minute 1:45*)

Root to the earth,
(*bounces, grins*) Blood from the heart,
(*raises both arms in praise- and face is animated from here until the end*)
Could never from birth
Be broken apart.

Food from the platter, (*brings left hand down with book, looks at book for a moment – other hand still up*)
Water from the rain,
The subject and the matter, (*closes fist in a grasping motion with 'matter'*) I'm
going home again.
(*both arms back down*)

Can't sell a leaf to a tree,
Nor the wind to the atmosphere.
(*points at own chest*) I know where I'm meant to be
(*changes vocal quality, raspy, whispery*) can't be satisfied here.

You can't give light to the moon, (*gestures up again with right hand and arm*)

Nor mist to the drifting cloud,
I'm going to be leaving here soon, (*beckoning gesture*)
(*beats on each word with hand*) Costumed, cultured and crowned.
(*no pause between stanzas*)
(*adds /ʃ/ to 'sugar'*) Sugar from the cane,
Coal from the wood,
Water from the rain, (*elongates 'rain' and the /n/ sound*)
Life from the blood.

Gold from the stone, (*almost sings 'stone' and gestures with right hand*)
Oil from the [I] earth,
I [(E-I) and stabs chest, 'yearned' with arm out) yearned ([I] and stab chest) for
([I] and stab chest) my [I] home – (*home on exhalation, his fingers stay on chest, moving with exhalation. He repeats home twice more– it becomes a groaning sound*)
Ever since my birth.

Food from the platter,
Water from the rain,
The subject and the matter,
I'm going home again.
(*repeats 'I'm going home again' with a smile*)

During the first half of the poem Sissay is frowning, then, perhaps when he locates the poem, at minute 1:45, his facial expressions transform and the rendition becomes larger than life, smiling, wide eyed, and emphatic, with the stabbing of his chest and breaths between words functioning as a stylised kind of punctuation. This is speculative, but it is possible that Sissay realised mid-way through that his performance was distracted and that he needed to bring the audience back, and so he over compensated with a sudden exaggerated use of voice and body. The apparent distraction during the opening lines of the poem may alternatively be connected to the amount of background noise we can hear in the clip. If he was performing in a location where there was through-traffic or noise from an adjoining space, he may have, after finding the noise distracting, amplified his performance style in order to hold the audience's attention. During Sissay's performance at the Library of Congress, when the microphone stand needed

adjusting, he abandoned the poem entirely for a while, thereby using the interruption and adjustment as a conscious performance device, using ‘failure’ as a ‘generative’ tool. Here, the performance seems to be of two halves. The abrupt shift of energy half way through the poem does not match the structure of the poem, which is not in two parts. Looking at other performances by Sissay I believe that this is a less focused performance than usual, however, it provides a useful comparison to the second version of ‘Gold from the Stone’.

The second version of ‘Gold from the Stone’ is embedded within an autobiographical lecture entitled ‘Poetry is the Voice at the Back of the Mind’. It took place at the Nantucket Project, an annual conference in Massachusetts (with a high attendance fee). Their website reads: ‘Each fall, The Nantucket Project gathers 500 visionaries and seekers to the island to discuss the boldest and most thought-provoking ideas of our time’. Sissay starts ‘Gold from the Stone’ at minute 17:11 and goes straight into it without pausing between the introduction, the title, and the first line. He uses some of the same techniques, such as breath between words in the penultimate stanza, however, the use of voice, breath and physicality is less exaggerated, and his energy is amplified throughout the whole poem. There is no shift mid-way, and he recites by heart – not holding a book at all (he brings a book on stage but places it on the ground). Here are the final stanzas:

Gold (*sings ‘gold’ on rising pitch*) from the stone,

Oil from the [I] earth,

I [E-I] yearned [E-I] for[E-I] my [E-I] home [E-I] Ever [E-I] since [E-I] my [E-I] birth.

(no pause)

Food from the platter,

Water from the rain, (*drops pitch and shifts balance back to left, gesturing with left arm, pointing finger up*)

The subject and the matter, (*between lines, he places both hands on his chest then lets them fall to his side*)

I’m going home again. (*final line delivered simply, with a smile, then he does a strong pointing gesture as if to underline or put a full stop at the end of the poem*)

In this version Sissay does not repeat the word ‘home’, making it ‘strange’ through

repetition and vocalisation, nor does he stab his chest on the breaths, doubling the impact of the breath, as he did in the London performance. However, the distinctive use of breath between words occurs in both versions; it has become a feature of the ‘live writing’ of this poem, the breath is as ‘present’ as the words, rather than, in the conventional lyrical mode, serving as a vehicle to carry the line. In the London performance Sissay sings the word ‘stone’ – the final word of the first line of the penultimate stanza. In this performance he sings the word ‘gold’ on a rising pitch (the first word of the first line of the penultimate stanza). In both versions he takes a breath before the word ‘earth’ (the final word of the second line of the penultimate stanza). This suggests that the distinctive breath is a recurring element of the live writing of the poem. It is an unusual place to breathe and does not follow the line break. The effect, in both performances, of the delivery of the penultimate verse, with its extra-daily use of breath, voice and gesture, emphasises the simplicity of the delivery of the final line: ‘I’m going home again’. In both performances he delivers the final line: ‘I’m coming home’ very simply. Because it is almost the only line of the whole poem that is delivered simply, this delivery foregrounds the line.

The technique of foregrounding can, as Mukařovský describes, draw attention to ‘the act of speech itself’ and push communication to the background (45). It is a way of defamiliarising speech in performance. Sissay foregrounds ‘the act of speech itself’ with his vocal timbre, audible breath, and gestures. In the London performance, when Sissay shifts his energy midway through, the stabbing gestures and audible breaths become so ‘loud’ they are foregrounded over the words. The impact is intensified because we do not arrive at this dynamic gradually through the poem, but are abruptly shifted to this impassioned delivery. The gesture does what the words already do, to such an extent that they almost make the words redundant. By repeating the word ‘home’, and transforming it into an exhaled groan, Sissay prevents the word from being anyone’s home, from being an individual audience member’s idea of home, and instead foregrounds the groaning sound of his voice, which is perhaps Sissay’s emotional response to the idea of home. The exaggeration of this groaning sound means this comes across as a representation of emotional response rather than a genuine groan triggered by emotion in the moment of performance. Paul Simpson questions what happens when the ‘deviant pattern’ (or unusual mode of delivery) is established throughout a text. He asks: ‘Does it stay foregrounded for the entire duration of the text? Or does it gradually and unobtrusively slip into the background?’ When the unusual feature becomes usual,

any deviation from this new, unusual norm becomes known as internal foregrounding ‘a kind of deviation within a deviation’ (51). This is what Sissay achieves with his final line ‘I’m coming home’. As this line comes at the end of extreme extra-daily use of voice and gesture, in which style is foregrounded over content, when he delivers the final line simply, it has a stronger impact. Each of the three words are foregrounded, and so are the potential meanings.

Sissay’s performance mode could not be described as an ‘emptying’ of presence in the ways conceptualised by Bernstein, Hall and Bergvall; rather, he layers up aspects of his presence, he *amplifies* his presence. Sissay creates performed palimpsests from the anxiety around authority and the presence of the author. Sissay amplifies and exaggerates his vocal and physical languages to such an extent that they gain their own signification, to such an extent that he *writes himself* in performance. Sissay plays with the questions that Barthes and Derrida prompt in their questioning of authorship and meanings, and that Brecht explores in his exposing of theatrical device and interest in making the audience question the structures of society and theatre. Sissay questions the validity of the speaking subject, and reveals and questions the structures of society that are usually taken for granted. Perhaps it is because Sissay does this in such an overtly ‘theatrical’ way that his work has not been discussed in relation to the avant-garde, who tend to ‘deconstruct’ on the page rather than in performance, and usually prefer a ‘monotonous incantation’ mode of delivery (MacArthur, ‘Monotonous’). Rather than avoiding using the first person, emptying the presence and attempting to foreground the ‘writing’ rather than the physical presence of the poet, Sissay amplifies and exaggerates his own presence to such an extent that his presence becomes a part of his live writing. Sissay does not just affirm his ‘I’, as detractors of performance poetry are so critical of with terms such as ‘naïve identity politicking’, but he overtly performs it, analyses it, amplifies and deconstructs it.

6.5 Defamiliarising the body

The opening five seconds of ‘I Hate You’, a poem Sissay performed as guest poet at the Mouthy Poets showcase in Nottingham, shows him doing a gesture with pointed fingers and open mouth, turning his head, shifting his gaze from his audience to observing his fingers and spiralling his arms. Once he has started the poem he stops spiralling his arms but continues using the pointed forefinger. This is the moment we were discussing

when Sissay referenced Tim Crouch. He remembered the performance and said that extending this gesture ‘further and further’ took him ‘into the Tim Crouch realm’. Sissay made the gesture strange through repetition, rhythm, the intensity of his facial expressions, the staccato movements of his head, and by looking at the gesture, performing the ‘act of self-estrangement’ as Brecht describes: ‘To look at himself is for the performer an artful and artistic act of self-estrangement’ (‘On Chinese Acting’ 17).

Figure 22. ‘Lemn Sissay – “I Hate You”’ [0:05]



The gestures that a poet makes are part of their poetry. As LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka writes of Thelonius Monk: ‘The quick dips, half-whirls, and deep pivoting jerks that Monk gets into behind that piano are part of the music, too’ (35). Like Salena Godden who executed her limp wrist gesture between words, Sissay’s particular use of gesture occurs independently of speech, and is even more notable, as it does not emphasise or

describe the imagery of the poem ('Limp Expectations' [0:55]). It cannot, as the poem has not yet begun; except of course it has, it has begun with gesture. In both instances the poets are 'writing' with gesture. Sissay's gesture leads seamlessly into a staccato comment: 'this poem's called "I Hate You"', which is performed as if it is the conclusion of the gesture rather than the introduction to the poem. During the [spoken] poem Sissay continues the pointing gesture, but now it is no longer abstract but has intention, pointing at the imagined subject of the poem. Like David J, his forefinger seems to conduct his voice, at second [0:25] his finger moves up with the unnatural pitch of his voice (then holds the silence for a moment).

Figure 23. 'Lemn Sissay – "I Hate You"' [0:26]



The physical opening of the poem, before Sissay speaks, generates laughter (as can be heard on the recording). Like the musician whose opening breath is in the appropriate time signature and rhythm, this gesture is in the rhythm of the poem. The absence of language makes the gesture abstract and absurd, and allows the audience to respond to it before knowing what the poem is about. Sissay's use of gesture is entirely defamiliarised. It has no easily recognisable meanings; the audience responds to its strangeness with laughter. The laughter it provokes in the audience is fitting with the content, energy and rhythm of the poem, and gets the audience laughing before they even know what the poem is about. It is a poem that is full of insults ('You're as popular as a posted birthday gift to somebody who's just died. I once said you wasn't that bad, I lied. You're a conversation number. Your presence sticks lips together'). By generating laughter in his audience before he begins the poem, Sissay ensures that the response to the language of the poem is out-loud laughter right from the start. The

audience's mock outrage escalates with each insult. Although the performance is of a different style from that used by hip hop artists and poets, this poem can be seen as a form of Signifyin. Sissay's whole poem 'sigs' on an absent (and perhaps imaginary) person. He uses the kind of playful, witty 'unexpected and quick verbal surprises' that are characteristic of signification (Smitherman 119).

In our interview Sissay talks about breaking out of a poem to question the meaning of his own gestures. He demonstrates the way he takes a rhetorical gesture that the audience would habitually take for granted, or see as simply indicating generosity and openness and re-frames it, revealing that out of the context of the poetry-performance the gesture could be read as a threat of strangling:

I used to have a whole thing on stage where I'd (*interrupting the poem and referring to his physicality*) go 'do you believe me?' (Sissay demonstrates strangle gesture in the air) because this is weird... if a guy came up to you in the street with his hands like this you would say 'go away now', but on stage people think, oh he's such an open guy, so I'm like 'so this is alright is it? I stop in the middle of a gig and have a whole joke about that.

Figure 24. 'Report Card 2015 Manchester Launch'⁷²



⁷² This image is taken from a web page entitled 'Report Card 2015 Manchester Launch'. Although it is of Sissay's keynote speech at Manchester University (rather than a performance), it illustrates the same gesture he showed me in our (audio recorded) interview.

Sissay reveals the strangeness of performance and everything that the ‘contract’ between audience and performer permits us to take for granted. Audiences at poetry events are not in the habit of interpreting gesture independently of language; a gesture is not expected to carry meaning in itself but is the accompaniment and enhancement of spoken language. We take the convention of direct audience address for granted, we do not look for significance within it, and perhaps we forget the associations of power, politics and preaching that the direct address evokes. Grand physical gesture is simply experienced as passionate. When Sissay breaks out of the ‘poet’ persona he reveals that these conventions of performance prevent us from seeing and responding to the body on stage in a more nuanced way. Through techniques of defamiliarisation Sissay opens up the possibilities of experiencing the body as part of writing.

The motif of decontextualising gesture to consider its meanings, like the recurring themes of blackness and the expectations of Sissay as a poet, recurs across multiple performances. During Sissay’s TedX Salford talk he gesticulates, then stops speaking, continues gesticulating, looks at his hands as if they are moving independently of him and uses this defamiliarisation device to reveal the strangeness of his physicality, alongside his awareness of his role and the expectations upon him in different contexts:

so (holds fingers out, looks from one hand to another, wiggles fingers) I’m not on drugs by the way just so...don’t even don’t don’t this talk will now never get on TED because the black Americans will go ‘really, did you have to? Did you have to make that joke?’ (‘Morning Breaks’ [11:49])

Figure 25. 'Morning Breaks: Lemn Sissay at TedX Salford' [11:46]



As with the strangle gesture that we discussed in our interview, Sissay breaks the moment, and makes the conventions of performance strange. Sissay looks at his body, asking what it signifies, and how it might be interpreted in other contexts. Brecht, in his essay on Chinese theatre, could be describing Sissay when he talks about the Chinese actor who looks at his own body whilst performing and *'makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at'* (16 – italics in original). This self-critique of the moment of performance prevents the audience from signing up to the 'suspension of disbelief' that is the default mode for the spectator. Brecht writes that the actor:

looks at the spectator as if to say: Isn't it just like that? But he also looks at his own arms and legs, guiding them, examining them, in the end, perhaps praising them.
(Ibid)

Using this technique, Sissay defamiliarises in two senses: he defamiliarises the audience's viewing of his body, enabling it to take on new meanings, and at the same time views his own hands as if they are moving independently from him, as if he is seeing them for the first time and wondering what they are and what they mean. We could say that he separates the mind from the body for a moment in order to analyse what the body is communicating. As in the case of the Chinese actor that so inspired Brecht, this requires a total psychophysical awareness. By drawing our attention to his

gestures and to the conventions of performance, Sissay makes these conventions strange, he ‘reveals the conventions’, questions their meanings, and he removes the action ‘from the realm of the self-evident’ (‘On Chinese Acting’ 16). Instead of enhancing the meaning of his speech with his gestures, Sissay gives his body separate signification to his words and use of voice, thereby using all aspects of performance as part of his live writing.

Working with the director John McGrath on *Something Dark* marked a turning point for Sissay, he told me: ‘John took me away from the audience’, away from the position of direct address which is often default for a poet, to explore how the body and the face can reveal the subtext of the writing. McGrath showed Sissay how to use physical action to recall emotional memory (as in Stanislavski technique). In so doing his body becomes part of the poetry, revealing the poetry that is inscribed into it:

The natural response for goodbye is to hold your hand up like this right? (Sissay demonstrates the typical wave) He’d [McGrath] say yes but who are you saying goodbye to? Let’s say it’s to your mother or foster parents, so I said well it’d be like ‘good bye’ I’d be looking away from them, I’d be thinking myself, I’d have my head down, I’d not want to look at them, and so the moment you do that good bye, even in rehearsals, the moment you do it in such a way, you have an emotional memory as well, that’s the amazing thing a physical memory of saying goodbye to some... so I’d do that in the play and the audience would be in tears, because of that movement.

Brechtian approaches reveal the artifice of performance so that the audience can question the contexts of the performance itself; to do so the audience needs to be aware that they are watching an actor present a character. The approach to gesture described by Sissay is Stanislavskian rather than Brechtian. Like Stanislavski’s work with physical action, here Sissay uses gesture to recall emotional memory, and the resulting emotional response in himself and his audience (rather than the lack of empathy Brecht aimed for) is his desired outcome.

Brecht and the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky share terminology in their aims to ‘make the familiar strange’, however, they do not have the same reasons for doing so. Brecht wishes to prevent the audience from unquestioningly empathising with characters on stage, whilst Shklovsky is interested in making the familiar strange in

order to restore its meanings, and to make us *feel* things:

art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (Shklovsky 778)

For Brecht, defamiliarisation enabled social critique, and cerebral responses to the theatre, for Shklovsky, defamiliarisation should heighten our awareness of what is being written about, or performed. Shklovsky states ‘art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony’. Sissay draws attention to the act of watching the poetry performance. He draws attention the fact that *it is* a poetry performance. He asks the audience to question themselves, the context, and their expectations of him as ‘poet’. Sissay draws out all the moments *around* the poem, often giving them more time than the poem (the ‘stone’). If we imagine that Sissay’s poem is Shklovsky’s ‘stone’: Sissay’s extra-daily use of voice and body sometimes makes the stone stony, sometimes makes us forget the stone in favour of the person who is holding it, and his prolonging of the process of preparing to throw the stone (through his delivery mode and through his extended performed palimpsests) enable us to question what the stone is for, why it is there, who is paying for it, and what we expect from it. Perhaps Sissay does all this because ‘the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself’ (Shklovsky 778). Perhaps it is not the poem or the performed palimpsest but the whole event of poetry in performance that is Sissay’s ‘stone’. By prolonging our engagement with the themes and meanings of his poems, the act of watching him on stage, and the wider contexts that render the whole thing possible he makes his poetry performances *stony*.

6.6 Defamiliarising Lemn Sissay

At the Royal Court Theatre downstairs on Sunday 30th April, 2017, at 18:00, Lemn Sissay presented *The Report*.

The Report lasted for two hours. It was directed by John McGrath (who also directed *Something Dark*). The project came together quickly, over a few days. The Royal Court theatre downstairs was sold out. Sissay and Julie Hesmondhalgh entered. Sissay stood centre stage and read his blog post from the 20th March 2017 (a month earlier). His blog explains that he had to have a psychological report to provide evidence of wrongdoing done to him by Wigan social services as part of his case against the state. He is suing the state and the Report documents the damage and the lasting effects of his experiences in Wigan council's 'care' system. His blog recounts meeting the psychologist who said 'we're going to be five hours at least' before 'the psychological interrogation' of his life began. He says that he has not read the 25-page report yet. He says 'I want someone to read the report to me' and that he wants this to happen on stage 'in front of a live audience. One reader. One table. And me. It will be called *The Report*'.

The set was simple; it looked like a psychologist's office, with a large desk and chair behind it (for the actor Julie Hesmondhalgh, tasked with reading the full report), and an armchair stage right with a side table with a glass of water. After reading his blog post Sissay sat in the armchair and Hesmondhalgh read the introduction to the report standing in front of the desk, then continued, sitting at the desk. The report was repetitive and appeared to be unedited. It began with the story of Sissay's life as told to the psychologist by Sissay. It then re-told the events through the documentation provided by social services and Wigan council. In the final section the psychologist reflected on all of the material and provided his psychological assessment of Sissay. During the reading Sissay remained seated, he folded his arms, looked down, and sometimes turned towards Hesmondhalgh slightly. Hesmondhalgh read the report facing the audience, at intervals she broke out of her reading to ask Sissay if he wanted to say anything and if he was fine to continue. He always said he was fine and that she should go on. Towards the end he said 'I couldn't have done this on my own' and several audience members shouted out their support.

Sissay's life story would have been familiar to anyone who had seen *Something Dark* or his talks. As he told the psychologist, he has spent his 'whole life putting [the story] together'. He told the psychologist that he had 'no identity' and that his 'identity [was] based on being not like everyone else' and that 'my writing was my identity'. Sissay revealed that he was 'always under threat'. He was surrounded by racism throughout his

childhood. At one point he was put in a room with a confirmed Nazi. He told the psychologist that he is always aware that white people might see him as a threat. He even avoided breakfast at his hotel the morning of the assessment, as he didn't want to make the white people having breakfast feel uncomfortable. The report reveals that the actions he was often punished for were his responses to racism from the authorities, the police, other children, and those who were responsible for his care. Sissay said 'I don't trust institutions' and revealed 'I've raised my profile solely to be able to look them in the eye'.

Finally, Hesmondhalgh read the psychologist's evaluation. The psychologist described how for Sissay, performance is a safe space that enables him to interact with others at a distance. He diagnosed Sissay with chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (involving intrusive thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks), Avoidant Personality Disorder and difficulty forming relationships, a tendency to self-sabotage and Alcohol Use disorder. He commented on how Sissay pushed away friends and partners when they got close. He concluded that Sissay would struggle with these conditions and have difficulties forming relationships for the rest of his life. The psychologist commented that the trauma Sissay has experienced and the impact this has had on him has shaped his personality, has become a part of him, a part of his identity.

Behind me in the stalls, a woman was sobbing. It is hard to judge the event as a piece of theatre, and I am not sure it is necessary to do so, although the use of a set, and the formality of the reading does seem to invite us to view the event through this lens. Simon Hattenstone reviewed *The Report* for the *Guardian*, and although he knows Sissay personally he comments on aspects of it as if it is theatre, describing it as a 'blistering one off show' and 'the ultimate verbatim' and 'theatre at its most raw'. He describes Hesmondhalgh as if she is acting and portraying a character that can be broken out of when he comments: 'Hesmondhalgh is wonderful – particularly when she breaks out of character to ask Sissay if he is all right and if it's OK for her to go on'. Rather than seeing her as an actor in a role, I viewed her as a friend of Sissay's who (because she is his friend and also an actor) had the tough job of reading the report.

Perhaps I find it odd to comment on this as if it is theatre and as if Hesmondhalgh were playing a role because the content was so difficult to hear. The surface of it, the set, and the directorial approach was almost invisible, overwhelmed by the content itself. In a

sense this was the opposite to my other experiences of Sissay's performances. When performing poetry his body, voice and presence often feels foregrounded over the content; here the content overwhelmed all the constructs of theatre. Of course, in spite of his silence, Sissay was the subject to a greater extent than in any of his other performances. The formality of the staging contained the extremity of the material, made it feel slightly safer, housed within the rules and conventions of a theatre, the same conventions that Sissay usually tries to disrupt. Perhaps it was this strange security of the stage setting that made this the easiest way for Sissay to experience the report. Sissay told Hattenstone:

I feel good on stage. I feel, in a bizarre way, like I'm with family. This is the best way for me to look at those files. I couldn't be in a safer place. I feel more comfortable having this out in the open, because they fucked me up when I was on my own.

Paradoxically, the theatre context enables Sissay *not* to perform, but just to listen and experience, like a spectator at the theatre. It is too much for one person to take in on their own. This staging shares the responsibility of *hearing*, requiring his audience to take on and share this difficult act of listening. Although Sissay is almost silent throughout this event, he is still playing with the conventions of theatre and questioning the ways in which his audience listens. We do not know whether to listen to this as theatre or as life, we do not know whether to see the two figures on stage as performers or people. He constructs a space in which he is able to just be a person on stage, but at the same time we are listening to various versions of 'him' as told by himself, by social services, and by a psychologist. Although the entire event is about 'Lemn Sissay' his identity is not 'fixed'. His authority as 'author' is still being disrupted. He is, again, being written and re-written, heard and re-heard.

The first time I saw Sissay perform I was frustrated by the way he delayed reading his poetry. I felt like he was wasting time. I just wanted to hear his poems. When he finally read a poem I thought it was great and didn't understand why he had sabotaged his own reading and wasted so much time on tangents and introductions. I also felt a little cheated, having travelled a long way to get to the reading; I felt that I hadn't got my effort's worth. When I watched Sissay on future occasions I became fascinated by this aspect of his performances, and began seeing these performed palimpsests as part of his

writing, part of his work as a poet, part of what I had travelled to see.

The trope of delaying the reading of his poems could be viewed as a way of testing the audience, their engagement with him, their interest in him, their expectations of him. The performance space becomes a controlled laboratory in which to explore interpersonal relationships and the possibility of rejection. It is a safe way of putting his level of acceptance to the test and seeing how far it can be pushed. His relationship with his 'audience' is unbreakable, it cannot be sabotaged, and although an audience is a changing group of people, when he is with an audience Sissay feels 'like I'm with family' (Hattenstone). While one performance might be better received than another, he has never been rejected. He has always been invited back, and has gathered accolades and symbols of acceptance from institutions such as his MBE and election to ceremonial chancellor of Manchester University. The stage is, as the psychologist reflects, a 'safe space that enables him to interact with others at a distance'.

Sissay has found ways of making intrusive thoughts part of his performance, playing with the idea of multiple voices, staging the possible reactions and thoughts of his audience. The poetry performance becomes a safe space in which to test his identity and make method from traits that would otherwise interrupt the focus that most poets consider necessary in performance. Shakespeare's Polonius comments on Hamlet's changed conversation and behaviour: 'though this be madness, yet there is method in 't' (2.2.205). Making a method from one's madness can be an artistic strategy, a way of generating material out of 'failure'. Sissay's stage self is a replica of himself, but one that he knows how to operate and can do so in a controlled environment, where risk is possible, housed within the security of an audience-performer relationship. His audience has chosen to be there and seek this interaction. It is a context in which he cannot feel that he has inflicted himself on others and at the same time he does not have to maintain a relationship with audience members off-stage. Sissay's career as a poet-performer has given him a stability. The psychologist concludes:

[Sissay] meets some of his needs for acceptance and love through the superficial and impersonal relationships he forms through being famous, whereby he interacts with people but at a safe distance. (*The Report*)

Sissay's fame and his performances enable him to 'rehearse' these relationships, to test

out the stability of his position as a poet on stage. Hearing the facts and aggressive acts that were taken by the authorities in the name of 'care' read out in front of Sissay and an audience is the ultimate act of defamiliarisation. His life is defamiliarised, it is made strange by being staged, by being framed as theatre, by being told and retold from different perspectives. *The Report* generated a huge amount of empathy in the audience and at the same time the reading and context imposed a distance from the content that enabled us to reflect upon the systems, institutions, and cultural values that have resulted in this event ... and person.

This certainly is identity politics, at its most extreme, and its least 'naïve'. In this event, the 'identity politics' are given centre stage, whilst the subject, the 'identity', watches silently. This could be Caroline Bergvall's notion of a kind of 'live writing': 'where the performer's presence is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing' (6). This could be what Barthes calls for when he asks for writing in which 'only language acts, "performs", and not "me"' ('The Death of the Author' 143). Sissay's poetry performances are usually loud and dynamic, his presence and energy amplified by his voice and body. He talks back and defamiliarises the conventions, systems and cultural expectations around him. The institutions that were supposed to care for Sissay acted violently upon him. Within *The Report* while the actions of these institutions, and the impact of these actions on Sissay are voiced, Sissay, the subject, is quiet. Writing and re-writing his life, testing his (a)liveness with an audience, revelling in the chance to change his script and re-write his own poems in the moment are all ways to prove that Sissay exists and has some 'authorship' over his own life. By asserting himself as the author of this staging, he exerts some authority over events from his childhood that effectively *wrote* him. As his and other's writings on his life are made 'live' by Hesmondhalgh's voice, Sissay's 'live' presence on stage 'is cut open, emptied out, absented by the writing's own presencing' (Bergvall 6). *The Report* demonstrates that there is nothing naïve about 'identity politics'. Sissay's mode of 'live writing' shifts the notion towards a kind of staged 'life writing'. *Live writing* is a way for Sissay to prove that although the trauma he has experience has shaped his identity, he is not already written, he is not a closed book. He must do this 'live', with witnesses, 'because they fucked me up when I was on my own' (qtd. Hattenstone). Through Sissay's live writing he writes and re-writes his 'live' self. While alive, the writer's presence, their 'liveness' is always part of their writing.

Conclusion

Sissay's 'live writing' in *The Report* connects 'live' and 'life' in a way that I did not envisage when I defined the phrase in the introduction to this study. My investigation of live writing has culminated with a writer who uses live writing to prove his own (a)liveness. Throughout this thesis, the 'aliveness' of the author is essential to the discussion of 'live writing'. A writer working in performance writes with every part of their (a)liveness. The voice, the body, the presence, and the breath are all part of live writing; the voice, the body, the presence, and the breath are all part of being alive. The availability of audio and audiovisual recordings means that even when the writer is not physically present, we can experience their live writing. Thanks to the work of archivists, Youtubers, and the many poetry nights that film their events, a poet's live writing is part of their body of work, even when the writer is no longer (a)live. The posterity of recorded poems means that the ephemeral nature of performance is no longer an argument for the critical elevation of printed versions and the lack of academic engagement with performance. The fact that the presence and psychophysicality of the poet is a part of their writing does not mean that Barthes' famously dead author never died. He did. The white, male, authoritative figure holding the final meaning over their poem is dead, and has not been replaced by a white, male, authoritative critic. Poets can use their live writing to destabilise other's attempts to write them; writing and performing poetry is a psychophysical act that engages the poet's entire (a)liveness.

This study demonstrates how the poet's body, voice, gesture, presence, breath, approach to improvisation, freestyling and introductions, asides and commentary can be analysed through the lens of live writing. It reveals how the lens of 'live writing' can shift the ways in which we view poetry in performance, impacting our listening and analysis. By focusing on analyses of the work of three contrasting, contemporary poets I have begun to fill a gap in poetry criticism. I have demonstrated that we need multiple methodologies and analytical toolkits when analysing poetry in performance. My chapter on David J required developing a taxonomy of vocal techniques and annotating a video of his performance. My discussion of Salena Godden's talk-singing involved a close listening to the ways she uses syncopation and writes live in response to a musical structure. Lemn Sissay's performed palimpsests and defamiliarisation of his body, voice and even himself led to tracing his approaches to performance back to Bertolt Brecht.

Starting from the poet's work rather than a particular methodology has led me to trace heritages of today's poetry performances through black semantics, oral literature, jazz improvisation, twentieth century theatre and Russian formalism. I have demonstrated that analysing poetry in performance through the lens of 'live writing' offers insights into the ways in which poets *write* with all strands of performance.

In 'Art as Technique' Shklovsky says that habitualisation 'devours work' and that art should remove objects from 'the automatism of perception'. Shklovsky tells us, 'art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony' (778). My interest in live writing and research into ways of 'making the familiar strange' has impacted my own work with poets as a workshop leader and director. As a conclusion to this study I offer some thoughts on ways in which a poet can expand their (a)live writing and restore stoniness to the stone.

During a workshop I led with the Barbican Young Poets in 2017, one of the poets performed to the group. He moved through images so quickly (using the features of British spoken word voice) that it was difficult to grasp the content. I suggested he paused after every few words and looked up at the audience for several seconds, and breathed. This instruction allowed him to unlock an alternative mode of delivery. The result was strange and powerful; as he watched us the imagery of his poetry felt alive in the air. Afterwards I asked what he was thinking during those pauses and he said 'I don't want to be here'. He meant, not that he didn't want to be in the room doing the work with me (!), but that he didn't want to be in his poem. He had been performing it in a quick, automatic way, partly because he didn't want to live it, he didn't want to write it again for us, live. It was an uncomfortable poem and he was racing through it because he wanted to get out of it. The silences he inserted were full of emotion and imagery. The silence enabled the poem to be written in the air around us. He was writing with the silence, live. When a line is always performed in the same way it can lose its 'sensation of life'. Finding new ways of delivering (and feeling) a poem helps 'make the stone stony'. When a poet moves out of their habitual mode of delivery, they 'make the familiar strange'. When a mode of delivery is entirely automatic it can be useful to go to another extreme, to make the delivery entirely strange, in order to feel the content again.

A poet might perform like a child learning to read, tasting the sounds in their mouth, or

like a newsreader with that automatic melodic delivery, or a sports commentator or politician. They might sing their poem like a lullaby or perform in a press up position that forces them to engage their diaphragm, or in a monotone, or with a huge intonational range, or as if they are trying to conceal the fact they are very drunk, or they might insert pauses every four words, or silences where they must just look at the audience, or perform whilst trying not to cry, or laugh, or as if their audience are toddlers, or like a comedian delivering lots of punch lines. These strange delivery modes are usually not the way the poet will eventually read their poem to an audience, but are techniques of making 'the familiar strange' and expanding the poet's 'live writing'. Once an automatised mode of delivery has been dismantled, the poet can restore their poem's 'sensation of life', they can feel it again, and deliver each line as if they are writing it in the moment. In a similar way to the poet who re-drafts and edits their poem on the page, a poet can also re-draft and explore the sounds of their poem out loud as part of their writing. We can write with our breath, our voices, our bodies and even our presence in space. When all strands of performance are written live, the poem revels in the sensation of life.

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