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experiencing spoken word through digital media platforms

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ABSTRACT

While attendance at performance poetry and spoken word events is on the rise, the dominant modes of encounter and consumption of contemporary spoken word rely much more heavily on digital platforms than on live performance, with views of high profile spoken word videos and clips reaching well into the millions. This paper explores the contention that the transmission of affect (the movement of feeling and emotional states which forms an experiential cornerstone of live poetry performance) is also a key part of the experience of spoken word viewed digitally through multimodal platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and other file sharing networks. While it is immutable that affect cannot be physically passed between bodies in the context of digital media consumption, this paper contends that the production of powerful affective drives within the body of the viewer is nonetheless assisted by the performance of spoken word viewed through a digital medium. Drawing from material affect theories and an examination of online communities, this paper presents a case for the consumption of spoken word via multimodal digital platforms as a site par excellence for the encounter and exchange of affect, as well as the proliferation of bold and socially engaged spoken word content. In doing so, the paper articulates new ways of thinking about the relationship between modes of consumption in performance poetics, and the importance of such creative practice in the contemporary digital world. Of particular note, there are also clear implications for Creative Writing pedagogy that can be drawn out of this intersection between creative practice and the digital space. Reconsidering the role of multimodal platforms in producing and receiving contemporary spoken word provides new opportunities to inspire socially informed and digitally engaged study.

Introduction

As evidenced by mainstream media articles such as *The Financial Times* Podcast episode *Spoken word: the rise of performance poetry* (Financial Times 2012),*The Independent's* 2015 article *National Poetry Day: The rise and rise of performance poetry* (The Independent, 2015), and *The Guardian's* 2019 article *Generation next: the rise – and rise – of the new poets* (Crown, 2019), the last decade has been hallmarked by a growing attention to the role of spoken word in the contemporary consumption of poetry and poetics. Regular spoken word events and poetry open mic nights have spread across the country, and benefit from the administrative oversight of organisations such as Apples and Snakes, one of the main organisations promoting performance poetry in the UK. This has led to the development of national spoken word competitions (e.g. UniSlam, the Roundhouse Slam, and the Poetry Society's SLAMbassadors). Market trends continue to demonstrate the increasing sales potential of spoken word poets such as Kae Tempest and George the Poet, and the value of this kind of dynamic and engaging content in the field of commercial advertising. Such trends overlap with the enormous success of "social media poets" such as Rupi Kaur, who began her career as a spoken word artist (Onwuemezi 2019). This entrenchment of spoken word in the cultural zeitgeist is mirrored and facilitated by the success of poets and artists who may be typified as "performance poets" in securing high-profile poetry awards such as the Ted Hughes Award (awarded to Kae Tempest in 2012 for their performance of *Brand New Ancients*, Hollie McNish in 2016 for her collection *Nobody Told Me*, and Jay Bernard in 2017 for their performance piece *Surge: Side A*) and the Forward Prize Best Collection, which was awarded to Danez Smith for their collection *Don't Call Us Dead* in 2018.

The narrowing of what is often characterised as the "page vs stage" division between print-based poetry and performance poetry already engenders questions about the role of multimodality in the art form. In *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance*; a profound and radical development of a framework for the analysis of performance poetics, the critic Julia Novak states that: "live poetry is characterised by the direct encounter and physical co-presence of the poet with a live audience" (Novak 2011: 62). While Novak's study is explicitly concerned with the live elements of performance poetry, it is no great stretch to articulate the position that the live and embodied encounter between poet and audience is a key element of spoken word as a medium, in a direct binary with poetry on the page. However, I contend that the contemporary preponderance of digital modes of consumption has added additional lines of enquiry. A cursory survey of some of the more popular YouTube channels for accessing spoken word content gives us a clear sense of the prevalence of digital consumption of spoken word. At the time of accessing (June 2020), the YouTube channel *Button Poetry* alone has over 1.28 million subscribers.

This article seeks to address the apparent discontiguity between the clear significance of the live, embodied experience of spoken word, and the fact that a vast percentage of the consumption of contemporary spoken word is in fact conducted through the screen via a digital medium such as YouTube, Vimeo, and other file sharing platforms.

In order to frame my analysis, I will first put forward a case for the importance of the live and embodied elements associated within the consumption of spoken word. To do so I reflect on my experiences as a creative practitioner as well as key theories concerning the nature of affect entrainment and transmission. To draw again from Novak's critical enquiry, any discussion of poetry in performance also necessitates an examination of the performance as an "event" that is situated in a spatio-temporal matrix (Novak 2011: 207-209) and as such has the potential to abnegate a digital mode of consumption that operates without a fixed space, and outside of a determined timeframe. While a recording of a spoken word performance will have a fixed duration, the consumption of it through a digital medium is not a set event, and is at the behest of the viewer. My own experience of spoken word as a practitioner and a consumer has an autoethnographic bearing on how the theoretical examination can be applied practically. I thus offer anecdotal evidence to demonstrate how the nature of these experiences shape our conception of different modes of consumption.

In November 2017 I performed alongside Tongue Fu as part of Freeflow Festival: a collaboration between The Sunday Times Peters Fraser and Dunlop Young Writer of the Year Award and the University of Warwick. Tongue Fu events, created and hosted by the poet Chris Redmond, bring together live spoken word and music, with the Tongue Fu band

extemporaneously producing backing music while guest poets perform their work. This necessitates a careful process of live collaboration between poet and musicians in order to capture the tone and mood of the poem and reflect it appropriately in the musical accompaniment. I don't think I was very good, having selected a poem that was quite flat to begin with, and delivering a rather muddled performance that never quite hit a rhythm. It was thus a rather uncharitable offering for the supremely talented Tongue Fu band. My fellow poets Soweto Kinch, Jess Green, and a selection of Warwick University students were much more successful, with effortless, professional and engaging performances throughout. This is not modesty, or self-deprecation after the fact; it was a feeling gleaned directly from the audience: a "mood in the room" during the performance. My own feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the success of my performance were caught by the audience and reflected back in kind. Such an airy description of the audience-performer dynamic feels rather imprecise, but it is exactly this angle of approach that the noted affect scholar Teresa Brennan adopts in the opening line of her foundational study *The Transmission of Affect*: "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?" (Brennan 2004: 1).

Affect transmission

Brennan's contribution to the field of affect studies is transformative in its potential to chart a framework for the study of affect transmission as a material and embodied process. As a broad definition of affect, I would refer readers to Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's brief but influential essay "An Inventory of Shimmers":

> Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces-visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations. (Seigworth 2010: 1)

Affects are a non-conscious experience of intensity which enact a physical change or response in the body. When an individual becomes aware of, or registers, an affect it is checked against previous experiences, recognised or remembered, and subsequently identified as a feeling. The nature of affect studies, and the "Affective Turn" (Clough 2007; Leys 2011) have deep-rooted implications which chart a critical landscape through Western philosophical study since at least the seventeenth century. The field has been notably progressed through the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari towards the end of the 20th century (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), though there are many intersecting branches and disciplines involved in contemporary affect studies. A detailed examination of the complex status of affect is beyond the scope of my enquiry here. I am specifically interested in the critical thought that governs the ways in which affect can be transmitted, and how this can be understood in the context of performance poetics.

In her article "Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect" affect scholar Anna Gibbs compares the process of affect transmission from body to body within a group to a contagious outbreak:

> Bodies can catch feelings as easily as catch fire: affect leaps from one body to another, evoking tenderness, inciting shame, igniting rage, exciting fear – in short, communicable affect can inflame nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion. (Gibbs 2001: 1)

As an illustrative description this conveys the broad scope of affect transmission. Affective responses to stimuli move from one body to another, gradually accreting in their intensity, provoking physical changes in the body. It is relatively easy to imagine applying this to the context of a spoken word performance, with a passionate performer enrapturing or enflaming the audience. The work of affect is unconscious, but it is also something that in practice can be palpably felt once the affect has been apprehended by the body; an experience that can be recognized by those who have undergone it. To

return to Brennan, whose work is a keystone for my analysis of affect transmission and negotiation, affect moves between bodies operating in the same space or environment: "the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The 'atmosphere' of the environment literally gets into the individual." (Brennan 2004: 1). For Brennan, the physical mechanism of affect transmission or "entrainment" involves a complex multisensory array engaging with multiple capacities by which the body receives affects including the individual's capacity to 'smell' the atmosphere of a room:

> If I walk back into the atmospheric room… and it is rank with the smell of anxiety, I breathe this in. Something is taken in that was not present, at the very least not consciously present, before. But no matter how thoroughly my system responds to the presence of this new affect, it is the case that something is added. […] One detects pheromones by touch or smell, but smell is more common. To smell pheromones is also in a sense to consume them. But the point here is that no direct physical contact is necessary for a transmission to take place. Pheromones are literally in the air. (Brennan 2004: 68-69)

In following this argument for the transmission of affect as a material encounter between bodies in a shared space, it becomes possible to identify the powerful potential of live spoken word and poetry performance. We are driven to apprehend affects that were not present in our bodies prior to the encounter, and as such the encounter gives us an opportunity to undergo meaningful and potentially transformative physiological and neurological experiences. In my own experience as both a performer and an audience member I can attest to the power of this affective encounter. Indeed, the negotiation of affect is not a one-way street in performance. As many spoken word artists will acknowledge, producing a powerful affect can often have unintended consequences. For example, the result of sharing trauma in performance can generate an affect that, once it has spread throughout the space, gathering in strength and intensity, may be magnified and returned to the poet and destabilise the performance. Conversely, the transmission of affect is not always a like-for-like replication of the affect in question. Brennan further notes that: "transmission does not mean that a person's [the recipient's] particular emotional experience is irrelevant. We may influence the registration of the transmitted affect in a variety of ways; affects are not received or registered in a vacuum." (Brennan 2004: 6). As such, an affect that manifests different responses in the body than those intended will change the nature of the performance. A performer may also encounter an audience or a space where there is already an underlying affect producing merriment and joviality, and a poem that was not intended to be particularly funny might somehow become hilarious (or vice versa). This is often earmarked as a problem with the contemporary Slam poetry scene, where the impact of a performance can be powerfully enhanced or diminished by the performances that have preceded it, and the affect still lingering in the space.

If the presence of bodies in a shared space is a prerequisite for this type of negotiation of affect, then it follows that something must be lost in an experience of a spoken word performance that is not live or between bodies operating in a shared space. This appears to have profound implications for digital modes of consumption, where the absence of a physical proximity between performer and audience members renders the physical transmission of affect immutable. If the material transmission of affect between bodies is not possible, the next stage of my analysis must address the increased consumption of performance poetry via digital media in the twenty-first century, and the implications of this multimodal encounter between the stage and the screen.

Through the screen

Of course, the suggestion that we can only experience affect through material contact with other bodies in a shared space can be immediately and vigorously repudiated. Film and television often move us through the screen. Digital modes of consumption obviously allow us to experience feelings of intensity charged by affects that are enacting changes within our own bodies. This view of affect as a force that can be generated by the body in response to specific stimuli is certainly in keeping with theories that underpin the affective turn. As Mary Zournazi suggests in her discussion with the noted contemporary affect scholar Brian Massumi:

> When we navigate our way through the world, there are different pulls,

> constraints and freedoms that move us forward and propel us into life […] Massumi's diverse writings and philosophical perspectives radicalise ideas of affect – the experiences and dimensions of living – that are the force of individual and political reality. (Zournazi 2002: 210)

What must follow then is an evaluation of the mechanisms by which affect can be apprehended and negotiated through digital media. I further posit that the multimodal encounters between a recorded performance of a spoken word poem and the digital platforms common to contemporary spectatorship and consumption (YouTube, Vimeo) create a unique and fertile site for the apprehension of powerful affects that help to shape socio-cultural exchange and understanding. Of note, my analysis in this article extends only to the most fundamental multimodal encounters, where digital media platforms are used to store and reproduce recordings of live performances of spoken word. Steve Dixon offers a clear explanation of the hierarchical relationship between the different elements involved in digital performance: "We define the term 'digital performance' broadly to include all performance works where computer technologies play a key role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics, or delivery forms." (Dixon 2007: 2). These role relationships are explored artfully in David Devanny's typology of digital poetics, tracking the representations and definitions of digital poetries to include generative poetry, three-dimensional poetry, durational poetry, interactive poetry, and kinetic poetry (Devanny 2017). Such digital poetries could include the projection of digital media on stage during spoken word performances, the live use of text generators or digital text during performance, live code as performance and digitally augmented sound poetry, or the multimodal Poetry Films. For the purposes of this article, I am referring specifically to the video recording and presentation of otherwise non-digital live performances in a digital space.

To experience affect through the medium of an asynchronous spoken word performance recorded and posted on YouTube must then involve a complex array of stimuli that "moves through the screen", triggering a direct response in the body. The audio-visual recording cannot replicate the physical entrainment of affect transmission between bodies (as outlined by Brennan) but it allows the viewer to suitably replicate the experience through auditory or articulatory parameters such as tone, pitch, and intonation, and visual cues such as posture, body language, and facial recognition. There is an extant field of scientific research exploring the relationship between sound and affect that posits sound as vibrations of the body, which accrue layers of feeling, significance, and meaning (Gallagher 2016).

This is further explored in the interdisciplinary 2013 essay collection *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, which features theoretical arguments for the: "move from a definition of sound in terms of experiential, aesthetic and 'qualitative extension' to one of sound as autonomous affective 'intensity'." (Scrimshaw 2013: 32). Contextualising this analysis, the soundscape of a recorded spoken word performance enables an affective encounter beyond simply the aesthetic or qualitative apprehension of the recorded voice as separate from the body. Sound experienced affectively through a digital platform still changes the body at a material level, undermining the notional immateriality of sound's intangible emotional pull (Scrimshaw 2013: 27). Notably, this is not unlike the pheromonal or otherwise bodily transmission and entrainment present in live performance. Visual stimuli from the recorded performance also contribute to the feeling evoked in the viewer. The Psychologist Silvan S. Tomkins, a key figure in the development of affect theory in the sphere of psychology, examines how conscious and non-conscious bodily responses govern displays of affect, which are then interpreted as emotions (Tomkins 1991). Non-verbal cues presented by the performer's facial expression or body language are apprehended on an instinctual level by the audience, and crucially this is a process which does not require the live presence of bodies. It is a physiological response to the presentation of visual stimuli which changes the body of the viewer. Drawing these fields of study together, we are presented with the evidence to support our implicit, experiential understanding that affect can indeed be communicated through the layer of the screen via the media of video and audio recordings. Furthermore, as we can easily apprehend, static images may also generate affect if they are of a particular intensity, the mechanism for which is explored by Anna Gibbs in her essay "Affect theory and audience" from *The Handbook of Media Audiences* (Gibbs 2011). There are certainly further implications for this multimodal encounter between consumers and

their digital platforms of choice, and the power of affect to transcend the encounter between bodies via remote and asynchronous digital media. There is someimportant research conducted into the field of Affect Computing (AC) which examines traditional affect detection modalities like physiology, face, and voice, and more complex multimodal systems (Calvo 2010). The integration of systems such as FACS (Facial Action Coding System) into applied computing may have some profound and bracing implications for privacy and self-identity as Yuval Noah Harari frankly outlines in *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Harari 2018). However, the degree to which affect is negotiated and transmitted through the type of multimodal interface between viewer and screen I am examining is not quite as sophisticated. You may be watching the screen, but the screen is not yet watching you. Nonetheless, the notion of the screen as a medium through which the body can be affected and materially changed by discreet stimuli is of great interest to performance poetics given the propensity for digital consumption. This is an element of digital content creation that has seen much advancement in the recent YouTube subculture of ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response). ASMR is a genre of audio-visual content where creators experiment with different sensory "triggers" such as whispering, chewing gum, brushing hair, or tapping nails on hard surfaces in order to cause a bodily response in the viewer (Keiles 2019). It is gathering enormous popularity, with research conducted into its ability to successfully make physiological changes to the body (Poerio 2018) and to generate feelings of relaxation and well-being (Barratt 2015). Its potential to provide a surrogate for encounters between bodies has also taken on much greater significance in the context of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, and the associated diminishing of opportunities to experience physical contact. The steady development of a contemporary digital community which seeks opportunities to reach through the screen and experience affective encounters through curated content foregrounds the importance of exploring the potential for spoken word through digital modes of consumption.

Assemblage and Digital Community

The interaction between bodies in a live performance space affords additional opportunities for the transmission of affect between the performer and the audience members. This experience of affect as a bodily encounter with a spoken word performance is diminished but not entirely negated when viewed through a digital medium. The live experience of the performance (and the dynamic encounter with powerful affects "in the room") is replicated by the body's capacity to generate affect in response to aural and visual stimuli. Something may be lost when spoken word is not encountered as a live performance, but there is also much to be said for what is gained through digital modes of consumption. One obvious benefit of consuming spoken word digitally via audio-visual recording as opposed to spatially and temporally fixed live performance is that it allows for repeated and consistent viewing. The critic Nelson Goodman discusses the distinction between Platonic ideals of autographic and allographic art, where autographic art (Apollonian restraint) is exemplified by painting or sculpture; that which is located in both spatial and temporal dimensions, and allographic art (Bacchic excess), governing music, drama, and performance – the live arts (Goodman 1976). Peter Kivy further expands Goodman's analysis in the context of a "type / token" binary:

> drama is among the allographic arts, and […] its analysis, along Platonic lines, closely parallels that of music. The written text of the play is the "score" of the work; a performance of the play is a "score compliant" and token of the type. (Kivy 2006: 3)

The need to establish a type / token relationship may feel somewhat academic, but it bears weight when considering how spoken word performances might be the subject of critical study. Individual live performances of a spoken word poem are tokens, but what might we identify as the "type" of a performance poem? This has traditionally been considered its written text; however, this is unsatisfying in a number of ways, not least because it invites quarrel over the page versus stage dichotomy. In order to form a peer-reviewed, weighed and measured critical consensus about a particular performance poem it needs to have been encountered commensurately. In this respect, tokens are ill-suited because they are individual experiences. You may see the same poet performing the same poems in a live performance, but if I see the poet performing the following night then it could be judged that we lack the same critical site for evaluation. We may subsequently read the same poem in print (the poem's putative "type") but we would no longer be able to discuss the performance

elements. The benefit of digital media is that it offers us a way to identify and position a common type for critical examination without resorting to text. We may have lost the element of live experience, and the associated affective encounters, but the audio-visual recording is much closer to the poem in performance than the printed text can ever be. It also enables a degree of re-playability. The visceral transmission of affect between bodies in a shared performance space is a particularly powerful affective encounter, but there is still much to be said for the affect that is generated within the self in response to stimuli. Moreover, digital platforms allow us to apprehend and curate this affect in ways that cannot be replicated in live experiential modes. Who hasn't restarted a song they were listening to halfway through the experience because they were enjoying it so much, or skipped back to watch a scene again on Netflix or BBC iPlayer?

I have personal experience of these benefits in my own pedagogy, having taught modules devoted specifically to performance poetics for a number of years in a range of different HE institutions. Using the audio-visual recording of a spoken word poem (the "type") hosted on a site such as YouTube allows students a shared frame of reference to critically interrogate a performance poem. Furthermore, the native features of the particular digital platform such as the ability to move to different points in the recording, replay sections, slow down the speed of the recording, add auto-generated captions, and otherwise narrow the focus of scrutiny facilitates a degree of micro-analysis that would be impossible in a live performance. This does not mean that the various "tokens" of a performance poem are unimportant; it simply enables a shared experience of the poem that is easily accessible through the multimodal interface. Such interfaces, native to a particular platform, can better enable a poem that has been written and performed for the stage to be consumed via a digital medium.

A further benefit of the multimodal encounter of stage and screen is the sense of community I alluded to earlier in the article. Interactive features of a particular media platform represent a digital simulation of the live performance and the concomitant sharing of the experience. Nonetheless, these features such as liking, sharing, or commenting on a video, sometimes synchronously during livestream events, are part of a multimedia assemblage that seeks to replicate the experience of being physically present at a live event. The conscious or non-conscious transmission of affect, which changes the affective dynamic of the space as well as the bodies of other participants, may be rendered through the interactions located in the comments section of a YouTube video. Of note, the specific mechanisms for interaction that are most common to digital platforms are often associated with the body, or bodily gestures. For instance, in order to indicate approval, users proffer the raising of a digital thumb. This kind of interaction runs the gamut of representative imagery, from simple gestures to the gentle bobbing of a heart emoji across a screen, the latter being a curiously pertinent manifestation of affect or feeling leaving one body and "transmitting" to another. Of course, thumbs and hearts now only represent a fragment of the ever-increasing retinue of emojis at the disposal of users. The affective dimensions of a fuller range of emojis are explored by scholars such as Luke Stark and Kate Crawford in their article "The Conservatism of Emoji: Work, Affect, and Communication" (Stark 2015). They lie outside of the scope of this paper but the fact that symbols which perform or enact functions of the body are so frequently adopted by popular social media platforms indicates ways in which the body is already hard-wired into the digital experience.

The rapid implementation of these new modes of expression over the last few decades demonstrates the significance of contemporary digital media in our affective communication, a point which is further examined by Monica A. Riordan in her article "Emojis as Tools for Emotion Work: Communicating Affect in Text Messages" for the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* (Riordan 2017). Digital platforms, with their array of bespoke native features, are developing new ways to facilitate the encounter of individuals and the sharing of experiences "through the screen". Such encounters, which utilise digital technologies as an extension of the body, or rather media platforms as a way to affect material changes in the body, reflect the seminal work of the posthumanist and ecofeminist scholar Donna J. Haraway. In Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" first published in 1985, Haraway notes that: "Any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly; no 'natural' architectures constrain system design." (Haraway 2016: 31). Haraway's theories situate the body, particularly the female body, as a non-discreet entity that is always therefore a hybrid organism, or

cyborg:

> It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine. It is not clear what is mind and what is body in machines that resolve into coding practices. Insofar as we know ourselves in both formal discourse (for example, biology) and in daily practice (for example, the homework economy in the integrated circuit), we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras. Biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. (Haraway 2016: 60)

Haraway's theories have been contextualised with the development of 21st century technology such as smart phones and wearable technology, and the narrowing of the gap between machine and human. Deborah Lupton further discusses the relevance of these ideas in the sphere of health and subjective identity, through the lens of body and embodiment (Lupton 2015). Haraway's specific focus concerning the queering of bodies, and the capacity for Assemblage Theory to be applied across an intersectional paradigm (Puar 2012), is also a key concern for affect scholarship. The displacement and replacement of component parts within and among bodies reflects the mechanism by which affect is transmitted in live performance (pheromones from one body are transmitted into another body) as well as the framework of affect negotiation via digital media. In the latter case, the screen acts as a layer through which certain affective states can be mirrored and generated in response to specific stimuli. Mechanisms for communication that are native to the particular platform, and the communities established, provide a further language or "digital sociolect" to explore how these exchanges are apprehended and reiterated. Specific quirks and features of user engagement add context to a performance poem, a process which is enabled by digital media platforms. This is compounded in the interaction of different media platforms, for example when the link to a recording of a piece of spoken word posted on YouTube is shared on a social media site such as Twitter. Content is often shared by users with additional thoughts, reflections, and comments helping to shape the manner in which such content spreads throughout social networks.

Space for development

As alluded to earlier , the notion of space is integral to the conception of performance poetics. In the context of live performance, this space is a shared site for the transmission of affect, involving material exchange between bodies. However, the space itself is also fundamental to the performance. I can attest from my own experience as a practitioner that the venue can substantially impact on performance, be it the grandiosity of a purpose-built performance space, or the comforts of a café or bar that has been temporarily transformed for the event. There has been much exploration of the ways in which space negotiates experience, for example the critical essay collection *Performance and the Politics of Space: Theatre and Topology,* edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz (Fischer-Lichte 2013), Robert T. Tally Jr's *Spatiality: The New Critical Idiom* (Tally Jr 2013), or Henri Lefebvre's foundational text *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1991). Reading through the lens of affective exchange, it is clear that the environment of the space generates stimuli that lead to particular affects: "the body's relations with nature and with its surroundings or 'milieu'" (Lefebvre 1991: 40). These affects are then carried into the performance and can influence it, be it the awe that might be experienced if the performance is staged in the Lyceum or the Royal Court, or a more or less intimate affect should the performance be in a corner of the local pub. Each of these different spaces will affect both the performer and the audience in different ways, and therefore contribute to the overall affective landscape of the event.

Again, I return to the distinctions between live performance and the consumption of spoken word through digital media. In this multimodal experience of stage and screen, what might be gained through a shared digital space? There are of course transparent benefits to a digital community: it allows for potentially greater and more diverse participation; it reduces some of the financial and physical constraints such as ticket prices for live events or the accessibility of venues. It also potentially offers a more democratic space for engagement by removing or at least reducing the socio-cultural associations and restrictions that can become tied to

certain spaces. The concept of a digitally connected community has understandably undergone a vast amount of critical examination since the advent of the digital age (Wellman 1997; De Souza 2004). Many texts in this field such as Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (Hine 2000) have relied upon ethnographic studies of digital communities in order to establish patterns of behaviour across online and technological cultures. There has also been interdisciplinary study conducted into the use of linguistic analysis techniques to analyse communication across digital communities (Herring 2004). In the introduction to their thematic section in the online *Journal of Computer: Mediated Communication*, Jenny Preece and Diane Maloney, Krichmar state that:

> No particular theory or set of theories currently dominates research on online communities. Rather we see the application of different theories that have been selected based on the disciplinary training of the researchers applying them. As new and novel practices emerge within the online community environments, researchers broaden their perspectives as they seek to understand and explain online community dynamics and their effects on people, organizations and cultures. (Preece 2006)

This approach to theoretical enquiry opens up a broad remit for evaluating the rapidly developing profile of online communities specifically engaged with spoken word and performance poetics. In my own ethnographic analysis of the comments section featured on common platforms such as YouTube I have encountered a prevalence of comments that attempt to disclose emotional responses to the poem. Comments frequently concern the intensity of the poem, or note how much it has moved them. Some commenters will draw on personal experiences that conveyed similar affective dimensions. Such reference to a specific personal memory is entirely in keeping with the mechanism of affect, where the same non-conscious experience of intensity is checked against previous experiences, recognised or remembered. In attempting to share the experience encountered, consumers are using the native features of their digital platform of choice to simulate a transmission of affect – an activity that is reinforced by references to lines from the poem, or digital timestamps from the video. This particular practice allows users to pinpoint specific moments in a digital recording where they apprehended an affect most keenly. While lacking a physical space for affect transmission, the multimodal assemblage of users opens up a digital space for a simulated affect, one which is mediated through the layers of stage and screen. The notion of "practice" in the context of my enquiry helps us to locate the notion of a digital space: one which is formed and shaped by actions and interactions between participants. As Margaret Wetherell notes in her article "Trends in the Turn to Affect: A Social Psychological Critique":

> affective practice is a moment of recruitment, articulation or enlistment when many complicated flows across bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories and contexts entangle and intertwine together to form just this affective moment, episode or atmosphere with its particular possible classifications. (Wetherell 2015: 160).

The movement of affect across media platforms and through digital networks facilitates a turn away from the notion of an affective encounter as a fleeting and specific experience, towards a global and sociological moment. The digital space created by recorded performances of spoken word poems allows the moment to persist and to be reencountered without the spatial and temporal constraints that a live performance necessitates.

Conclusion

The experience of a live spoken word performance cannot be captured entirely through digital means, even synchronous 'livestreaming'. To capture the precise feeling of the space, the affective landscape of the audience, the 'smell in the room', you really did have to be there. However, the multimodal encounter between a recorded performance and a digital space enables and facilitates different advantages. Poetry has the power to move us, and spoken word in particular is charged with affect. The ability to simulate an affective response to a spoken word performance through a persistent digital recording allows consumers to encounter and reencounter transformative physiological and neurological experiences with far fewer restrictions than a live performance. By reconstituting spaces of performance and engagement within the digital realm, the increased mobility allows us to reconsider audience as a designation that accommodates more than just physical participation in the live

event. 'Audience' may thus be expanded to include participants who are tuning in synchronously, or consuming content asynchronously, which provides opportunities for writers and performers to think more broadly about the impact and longevity of their work beyond the live performance. These reflections can be further measured and refined through tangible metrics of engagement such as views, likes, shares, and comments.

Multimodal encounters between the stage and the screen have powerful potential to provide experiences that educate us and expose us to affects that can change the way we think. In the context of creative writing studies, these educational opportunities are crucial to the development of pedagogies that reinforce the relationship between creative writing and the digital sphere. Such thinking contributes to a fast-developing field, made more and more pertinent in the increasing reliance upon digital modes for communication and consumption. As Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein note in the introduction to their 2015 text *Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*: "creative writers ought to view digital tools as providing an opportunity for students to broaden their creative skill set. Creative Writing has been – and always should be – about exploration and play, two linchpins of creative work in the digital realm." (Clark 2015: 2). The affordances of digital media in both the craft and consumption of contemporary performance poetics provides additional opportunities to experiment with and enrich the way students conceive of their roles as writers and audience members. The value of Creative Writing as a discipline for establishing further frames of reference and linking interconnected activities (Harper 2015) finds common cause in the development of new ways to integrate creative forms such as performance poetry with digital media platforms. Such integration offers avenues for expanding and enriching the capacity of spoken word to affect audiences, and to provide spaces for new connections to be established between media consumers. In *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Paul Dawson approaches the study of Creative Writing: "not as a practice (creativity), or a synonym for literature, but as a discipline: a body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting this knowledge." (Dawson 2004: 2). Dawson positions Creative Writing as a contemporary subject that is at the cutting edge of social development, and one which is well suited to producing graduates who can respond to the social and cultural upheavals that are inherent to twentieth (and twenty first) century life. The fertile intersection of creative writing and digital cultures provides clear routes for the development of socially engaged students who understand the relationship between communication and community. Communities that are developed through digital media platforms (and the digital spaces they establish) offer enriched potential for engagement with a broad array of individuals, and a greater site for the communication and negotiation of affect in contemporary spoken word poetics. In a period of intense social and political upheaval, where the better angels of empathy, compassion, and understanding can often feel like they're at a premium, opportunities such as these to explore our affective interactions are beyond simple luxury; they are necessary.

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